BIRD LIFE
THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

JOHN H. SALTER D.SC.

To Bill

With best wishes
for many happy returns
of the day.

from
Nellie + John

8th Oct., 1924

BIRD LIFE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

KINGFISHERS AND NEST IN RIVER BANK.
From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

BIRD LIFE
THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

BY
JOHN H. SALTER, D.Sc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
OLIVER G. PIKE, W. BICKERTON,
J. T. NEWMAN, HERBERT LAZENBY

ALSO COLOUR PLATES OF NESTING
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Preface

THIS work originated in the idea that, amongst the thousand-and-one books upon British birds, there might be room for yet another which should treat of their habits and mode of life as influenced by the varying seasons of the year. For each change—of strengthening light, increasing temperature and lengthening days, or the converse in the second half of the year—marks the epoch of some accompanying event in the bird-world so closely associated with it in the mind of the naturalist "who loves to lie i' the sun" that he cannot imagine the one without the other. What would the first genial day in February be without the first soaring skylark, or October's roaring gale without the fieldfares and redwings which drift overhead with the flying leaves?

In Southern France, where an earlier spring than ours treads on the heels of a winter which has passed with scarcely a hint of damp and chill, we are conscious of something wanting. The shower is past, and we listen, for what? On reflection we know what the ear expects—the song of the thrush. Alas, the Frenchman knows him better and appreciates him more in the form of *grive rôtie* than as the full-throated chorister who pipes the onward march of spring. For, spite of bird-catchers, idle hedge-poppers and larks netted by the thousand for the table, birds meet on the whole with a fairer and more sympathetic treatment in this country than they do across the Channel. A large amount of amateur interest in natural history is

afloat, as may be gleaned from casual notes in every newspaper. The early arrival of the cuckoo is noted by some more eagerly than the latest news from the East. Smith, who has found a robin's nest, with eggs, in his summer arbour, as he goes up by the early train triumphs openly over Jones, who can only report a blackbird building in his garden-hedge. Nor is our resentment over-deep when a smoky chimney is accounted for by the jackdaw's playful habit of filling it with sticks, or when the flooding of an attic is traced to a sparrow's penchant for nesting in the receiver of the rain-water pipe. For our familiar birds we have the feeling which springs from the inherited association of many generations. To take an instance—for how many centuries has the beauty of the hedge-sparrow's eggs appealed to the careless heart of boyhood? Happily in Britain none of our favourites are in the least danger of extinction; a state of equilibrium has been reached or nearly so, whereas in newly-settled countries many species disappear or retreat before the spread of cultivation. There is no corner of England in which one need be wholly out of touch with the birds, for, if food and shelter are to be found, they have not the least objection to the close neighbourhood of bricks and mortar. We do not refer to such notable bird sanctuaries as college lawns and "backs," numerous and varied as are the feathered tenants of these haunts of ancient peace. But close to the din and tumult of cities, the hum and clang of machinery, Nature still has her outposts and birds find a home. With what tenacity they cling to their time-honoured haunts the case of the Gray's Inn rooks serves to show. From the dusty and smoke-grimed trees of the city square, the Chaffinch rattles out his challenge and the Great-tit whets his saw, or with

his brisk " vítz-ski, vítz-ski," calls to an acquaintance, apparently of Polish nationality. The brook is transformed into an inky drain, foul with the smell of bleach-works, but Whitethroat and Sedge-Warbler still nest amongst the briars and brambles which overhang it. The quiet field-pond in the hollow becomes the rubbish-tip of neighbouring back-yards, but, as long as it has its fringe of willow and a few tufts of sedge and rushes, the Reed Bunting still makes it his home. Upon the first occasion when we listened to the note of the Quail, its voice came from a patch of rye-grass not two miles distant from Manchester City Hall. No farther from the same centre, but in another direction, the Cuckoo paid visits to surburban villadom and, sitting with open window on quiet nights, one might even hear a distant Corncrake. Migrants, such as the Willow Wren, Spotted Flycatcher, and even a pair of Lesser Whitethroats, returned each spring, undeterred by smoke-darkened skies and an atmosphere which soon robbed the young foliage of its freshness. In the suburbs birds are in fact less subject to the attacks of their natural enemies, such as hawks and weasels, than is the case in the country, though it is doubtful whether the advantage is not more than atoned for by the risk which they run from the all-pervading cat. The artful feline has been seen to stroll down the garden daily to inspect the progress of a nestful of young blackbirds, postponing attack until they had reached a reasonable size, while another brought the callow fledglings from a thrushes' nest and deposited them unharmed upon the drawing-room carpet. To the fact that most city parks possess a sheet of ornamental water we have owed more than once the delighted recognition of a vanishing streak of azure-blue as a Kingfisher, who, more venturesome than his fellows,

has followed up the stream by which the lake finds outlet. Few would suspect into what close proximity to industrial centres the Heron's fishing excursions will sometimes lead him in the grey of early morning. Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, and Yellow Wagtails delight in the short grass of suburban football-fields and the well-kept sward of cricket-grounds. The invariable occurrence of the Magpie and Carrion Crow in the immediate vicinity of large towns is no doubt accounted for by the absence of *their* natural enemy, the game-keeper. A Birmingham naturalist stated some time since that crow, kestrel, and green-woodpecker all nest within the borough boundaries, while in some well-wooded private grounds within two miles of the heart of the midland metropolis we are told that eighty-six species of birds have been noted, and that thirty-six have bred. This is a truly wonderful record, only to be accounted for by the fact that there is here direct communication with open country, and that for years a family of naturalists has devoted to it the keenest observation. To this bird-sanctuary come from time to time the three woodpeckers, the king-fisher, the common-sandpiper, the barn and tawny owl, even the woodcock and partridge, while the list of those which have nested includes the jay, haw-finch, stock and turtle-doves, and quite a number of the summer migrants. The reed-warbler, in default of reeds, has been known to place its nest in a clump of fern or at the top of a tall arbor-vitæ, and the chiff-chaff, perhaps with a view to cats, has nested fully five feet from the ground.

The Londoner is no less well situated, for he has the parks, where Wood Pigeons, in conscious enjoyment of the *pax britannica*, have so far forgotten their inherent shyness as to take food from the hand, and the

lakes, where Moorhens and Dabchicks are as much at home as the pinioned waterfowl with which they fraternise. The northern suburbs may have changed for the worse, but it is not so long since we could hear half-a-dozen Nightingales in full song and as many Blackcaps any spring morning at Highgate, and could there meet with birds so little likely to court observation as the Bullfinch and Hawfinch, while the notes of Nuthatch and Woodpecker came from private grounds which had retained some well-grown timber, and at dusk the Nightjar droned from the Bishop's Wood. The same neighbourhood recalls our first acquaintance with the quiet, seldom-heard song of the Butcher-bird, and a stroll over Hampstead Heath, of blessed memory, furnished a list of birds which would have done credit to a country ramble. Does the moorhen still haunt the Hampstead ponds,—scene of Mr. Pickwick's researches into the theory of tittlebats,—and does the sand-martin still burrow near by? With what joy we fled to those oases from the vast desert of bricks and mortar.

To such length have we been led by the desire to show that nowhere in our favoured land need the naturalist find his occupation gone. Hopeful, too, is the growing enlightenment of the youthful mind due to the inclusion of nature-study in the school-curriculum, so that no longer need we fear such errors of identification as that vouched for by a friend of ours, who, passing two small boys, who were leaning over a gate watching the excited evolutions of a pair of lapwings in the field beyond, heard one of them asseverate, "I tell you they *are* tom-tits." Closer knowledge and awakened interest will even prompt the village urchin to a better treatment of birds than has been the case in the past, though, while human nature remains

unchanged, it will never entirely cure him of the desire to make prize of their eggs.

The idea of a Nature Calendar dates from the days of good old Gilbert White and, as a helpful aid to memory, it can scarcely be omitted. Many such have been published, but are often misleading, inasmuch as they give the *earliest* date for each occurrence. The writer, from his own notes of the past thirty-five years, aims at giving an *average* date. It is evident that as regards nesting and the appearance of the migrants, there must be a considerable difference between Sussex or Hampshire and Northumberland, so that the lists should be approximately correct for a Midland district. The date given when a bird "nests" is that of the laying of the first egg.

Bird Life in January

Bird Life in January

THE first day of the year has come, looming large upon the horizon of all lovers of the outdoor life. As we sally forth, with the year some eight or nine hours old, breathing a fresh atmosphere born of hope and expectancy, yesterday seems far away. For the turn of the tide has come at last and matters in the great world of nature are now upon the up-grade. Lengthening days may bring strengthening cold, for winter has yet to show his hand, but the hazel-catkins, soon to dangle loosely, shaking out dusty pollen, give promise that, though he press matters with a rough hand, he shall finally be routed all along the line. The few short months when it is indeed good to be alive are all before us. Hardly is that January to be esteemed which brings too many foretastes, gives too evident hints, of the glad time, for experience tells that the balance is apt to be adjusted later with untimely cold ; far better for it to produce those frosts, not too severe, which act favourably upon the condition of the land as upon the public health. The month is never altogether without its signs and portents in the shape of pushful green shoots and swelling buds, but, when

a low barometer and the moist breath of south-westerly airs prevail, the old earth, not content with turning in her sleep, gives further signs of a premature awakening.

In such soft and kindly Januarys, bird-songs voice the general opinion that winter has this year dropped out of the calendar, and that, for those with a hopeful turn of mind, spring has fairly begun. So easy are the times that berries and hedge-row fruits hang long untouched, and few applicants make their appearance at the bird-table for the customary largesse of crumbs and kitchen-scraps. Day by day the thrushes pipe their matins and evensong, and some clear evening at sunset one catches a few mellow notes of accompaniment from the blackbird in the elm-top, though it is not till February that he takes his full part in the choir and in a chilly season may be voiceless until that month has half run its course. Much the same may be said of the chaffinch ; a chance hour when the January sun, breaking through the clouds, sheds unwonted warmth, may set him singing, just as it may draw a burst of song from the first soaring skylark of the year. But these are early days ; if colder weather ensues such impulses are no longer felt, and in any case the time of fuller and more constant song is yet to come.

Day by day the spring notes of the various Tits are increasingly in evidence. Unless discouraged by snow

or by more than a degree or two of frost, the Robin's quiet contribution of song and the Hedge-Sparrow's modest refrain will not fail us, while it takes a sharp snap of cold to still the Wren's loud but momentary outburst of minstrelsy, so often heard when the orange sunset sky tells of a coming night frost. In an open season Ring-Doves—not the migratory flocks upon the fields, but those familiar stay-at-home birds which spend the whole year about the shrubberies, lawn or paddock,—begin to coo. In mild districts, as in the south of Ireland, Herons resort to their nests and may even be building by the end of the month.

Other signs of the approach of the breeding season are not wanting. Some sunny morning towards the close of January there is unwonted stir amongst the Partridges, excited crowing, scuffling of rival suitors, racing and chasing over the fallows. The packs or coveys have broken up ; henceforth we see pairs only. Meanwhile the Rooks resort to their nests, and in the meadows we may watch the bowings and shufflings characteristic of rook courtship, and may see the cock-bird, glossy in burnished blues and purples, step up to present a choice grub to the object of his affections, who receives it with gaping bill and quivering wings. Such are some of the characteristics of the month when the vane veers steadily between south and west, and no treacherous anti-cyclone invites the Continental cold to invade our islands.

But few Januarys fail to interrupt these early romances by sudden recurrence to weather of a more seasonable type. The wind shifts to the north, and the evening sky is thick with coming snow. But the fall ceases by day-break and a bright sun lights up the untrodden whiteness, while all the bareness of winter is hidden by glorious frost-work. As we wander abroad, we are at once aware that birds in unusual numbers are everywhere upon the move. The first feeling inspired by the new conditions in the breasts of ground-feeding birds—larks, starlings, thrushes—is evidently one of consternation. They hurry to-and-fro, unable at first to make any plans, intent only on finding some spot where the white mantle is thinner than elsewhere, or where the first indications of an early thaw are already apparent. Thus the Song Thrushes seek a southern slope where the kindly face of mother-earth is already visible in places. Others are searching the hedge-bottoms, from which, in weather such as this, they turn out great numbers of banded-snails, hammering the shells into fragments upon favourite stones which serve as "altars." Meanwhile the Mistle Thrushes, Fieldfares and Redwings make a sudden descent upon the berries, of which, this being the first snowfall of the winter, the main reserve is as yet untouched. In these hungry times haws, holly or yew-berries none come amiss; all comers are tugging eagerly, for beggars cannot be choosers.

The snow is crossed in every direction by tracks, many of them made by mice. Larger *spoor* of the same type shows how unsuspectedly numerous rats are in the banks. Here a squirrel has paid his daily visit to a store of beech-nuts in the side of a heap of leaf-mould in the shrubbery. His prints show slender toes and long nails.

Yet another series of tracks puzzles us until we disturb various rabbits which are "lying out" amongst the brambles, showing that a stoat has driven them from their burrows. How is it, we wonder, that in the mildest winter some stoats change colour, becoming piebald or even veritable ermines, while the coats of others, even in the most severe frosts, show no trace of such a modification of tint. Age, sex or individual constitution may perhaps furnish the clue. A moving shadow passing swiftly up the slope calls attention to a kestrel which is quartering over the hill-side. Presently he passes in hot chase of a skylark. Kestrels undoubtedly kill many small birds in snow-time when other supplies are cut off. We have surprised them red-handed upon fresh-killed thrush and starling. Scattering the snow from the thistle-heads, a party of goldfinches takes flight with musical twitter. The robins have discovered that in the garden a manure-heap is being moved—no small stroke of fortune in times such as these; nearly a dozen of them have congregated at the spot. The gardener finds that

foraging parties of skylarks are attacking his young spring cabbages, and that wood-pigeons in the early morning have damaged the broccoli and Brussels sprouts.

One may make a long round while the snow lasts, finding at every turn something of interest, in noting the shifts to which birds are driven to make a living and their aptitude for making the best of trying circumstances. Lapwings are everywhere upon the move and a plaintive whistle tells that there are Golden Plover with them. The Snipe, driven from the bogs, have sought the warm drains and sides of running ditches. Woodcock, too, are snowed-out of their usual haunts, and one stumbles across them in all sorts of unexpected places—one near the lodge-gate, another close to the stable-yard. But nowhere is there such a gathering of the clans as in the stack-yards, which rise like kindly islands from the sea of white, offering both food and shelter. Finches and buntings in their varied tribes are here in force. Nowhere else can one so well compare their varied traits and mannerisms, and never does a bright sun bring out their details of plumage better than with the snow as background. Some merely hop and peck ; others fly up to the sides of the ricks to pull out straws in the hope of obtaining the ears of corn. In addition to chaffinches and greenfinches, there are to-day Bramblings in every stackyard. Reed-buntings fraternise with the yellow-hammers,

and one picks out by their red crowns and white cheeks a little party of Tree Sparrows amongst the vulgar crowd. Nor must we omit, if within reach of the coast, to visit the piles of seaweed carted by the farmers to the top of the foreshore after the autumn gales and left there until sufficiently decayed to furnish a top-dressing for their fields. These seaweed-heaps, full of small flies and their larvæ, attract all the insectivorous birds of the neighbourhood. Jackdaws and starlings have trodden them free of snow and broken up the surface, laying them open to the inspection of Meadow and Rock Pipits which trip nimbly about, picking up grubs and pupæ. Here, too, will be found the few Pied Wagtails which have remained to winter with us, now probably wishing that they had gone with the rest, for in cold weather they seem to lose all their sprightly, light-hearted activity. Near them a cock Stonechat, with his black head now very rusty, flips his tail with all the spirit that he can muster.

By early afternoon full thaw prevails. Starlings race along a sunny bank from which the snow has gone, quarrelling noisily. Next day the last long streak of snow fades under the persuasive influence of drizzling rain. Birds betake themselves again to their usual haunts and resume their ordinary avocations. But the case is different when the snow, reinforced by fresh falls or hardened by night frosts, lasts for more than three days. The Redwings, smallest and most delicate

of the thrushes, are the first to lose heart. They may be seen hopping about, tame and disconsolate, on the frozen grass-fields, or turning over the dead leaves in the woods. Soon there is downright want, and the weakest begin to go to the wall. An outcry from under the hedge-side calls attention to two magpies who are bullying a distressed starling which has fallen into their evil clutches. Another note of feebler protest comes from a thrush in reduced circumstances which is being attacked by one of its stronger brethren. How little reck the merry hares of the weather, as they play about the frosty grass by a cover-side.

Now is the time for those charitably disposed towards the feathered folk to come to their assistance, to open a soup-kitchen, or its equivalent, for the starving and unemployed. Restrict not the dole to crumbs—all too Spartan fare—but with kitchen-scraps of every kind, shreds of meat, potatoes, suet—even if a few raisins and kernels of nuts chopped fine be considered too lavish an addition—we may prepare a banquet worthy of the attention of an avian Lucullus. There is no need to spread the invitation ; a crowd will be waiting every day at the wonted hour. Nor must we forget a pan of tepid water, for in times of frost birds often suffer as much from thirst as from hunger. And right well are we repaid for our trouble by the amusement which the bird-table affords, and by the traits and eccentricities of the various guests. The robin at these

gatherings appears in no amiable light, but as a pugnacious stickler for first place. The sparrows, though greedy, are caution itself, anxious to make the best of the good things, though wholly mistrusting the motives of the purveyor. Now and then there is a scattering and rush of wings as a jackdaw drops down from the roof, grabs the largest available morsel and hastily carries it off. If Nuthatches can be induced to come, they are always an addition, their odd, jerky movements giving them a character which is all their own. Nuts will often prove an attraction ; they will toss away those which are without a kernel, not troubling to open them. For tits, there is the suspended coco-nut sawn in half, or the denuded framework of goose or turkey, forming a sort of magic cave in which they will sit and peck their fill. Watch the fussy indignation of a little blue-tit, as, a regular spitfire, he relieves his mind when a great-tit has driven him from his favourite lump of suet. These two species are regular comers ; the coal-tit is so to a much less extent, while the marsh-tit appears more rarely still. If walnut shells, filled with fat or chopped nut-kernels, are threaded on a stretched string, the tits will perform on the tight-rope for our benefit.

When there is a pond in the neighbourhood, a Moorhen will sometimes join the pensioners at feeding-time, jerking his tail and showing his white under-tail-coverts as he leaves the shelter of the sedges. At the

abbey, now the seat of a titled family, where at all hours of the day moorhens may be seen stalking about the well-kept lawns, we are told that as many as sixty come to be fed in winter. They are pugnacious birds, for as we watch them we note that every now and then one rushes at another to offer battle. The second party, however, always declines the combat, so that only a violent chase results. In this respect they resemble their neighbours the Coots, upon the lake, which spend much of their time in quarrelling, splashing through the water, half-flying, half swimming. Such are some of the small comedies of these January days, with tragedies enough not far in the background, for winter has not seldom a sterner side of which it remains to tell.

HARD TIMES

At wholly uncertain intervals come these unwonted frosts, bringing what we cheerfully term "a good old-fashioned winter," but causing to the birds wide-spread disaster, so that, had they their annals, the years when such occur would rank with those of the Black Death and of the retreat from Moscow. For memories of ice-bound ponds which "bore" for ten weeks at a stretch and of mornings when the screened thermometer showed thirty-one degrees of frost, we must go back to the late seventies or early eighties, but the frost of the early part of 1895, though it did not tighten its grip

until a later period of the winter, was almost equally long and severe. With real cold of this sort, with the temperature in the neighbourhood of zero, a white hazy stillness pervades the air; there is not a breath stirring to shake the powdered frostwork from twig and bough. For once, in place of our usual winter of mild Atlantic type, we have a specimen of the ordinary January weather of north-eastern Europe. Continuous and pitiless cold, ringing the earth's surface with a crust of iron, would try the birds severely, but they are in still worse case when all familiar landmarks are wiped out by deep and lasting snow. There is then a general move in search of more favourable conditions, and this not seldom becomes a wild *sauve qui peut*, in which millions of birds take part. As the snow, sometimes on the wings of a roaring blizzard, comes from the north-east, the movement is naturally towards the south-west, though, be it noted, birds object to fly directly before the wind, which in that case upsets their equilibrium and chills them by blowing between their feathers. They prefer the wind sideways or abeam. Perhaps instinct may also guide them towards the sole part of the kingdom where they may hope to find less arctic conditions. Great numbers appear at times to cross from the Welsh headlands to the south of Ireland. But too often disappointment awaits them even in the most favoured districts of the west country, and in the spring we find the dried remains of thrushes

and redwings in the crevices into which they crept for shelter when the frost was cruel and the thaw delayed.

One of these great movements down the coast, following a sudden onset of wintry weather, is a sight to be remembered. We sally out, to find everything deep in snow and more falling. The sea, having that peculiar dirty, angry look which it only wears when in contrast with its white setting, is dimly seen through the whirling flurries. A glance shows that the rush of migrants is at its height. Larks and starlings are passing almost without intermission, the two together constituting at least nine-tenths of the moving host, while the various thrushes would take the third place. As we plough our way through the untrodden drifts, wondering at the daintily chiselled architecture of wreath and cornice, there comes momentarily the rush of passing wings and the murky obscurity is pierced as with a hundred needles by the shrill call-note of the larks. A moment later they pass overhead, but, before they are out of sight, another party announces its advent. It may safely be said that never, from dawn to dark of this short winter's day, is there a moment when passing larks are not in sight. One hesitates to make a guess at the numbers of the migrating host, but it must run into hundreds of thousands. But in addition to those on the wing many have settled in the fields. The snow is crossed and recrossed in every direction by their tracks easily to be known by the mark left by the long hind

claw. Little parties of them—quite a picture of hard times—with their feathers puffed out on account of the cold, crowd every spot where the wind has swept away the snow, or search disconsolately for traces of turnip-tops here and there breaking its surface. A note, soft as the twitter of a goldfinch, calls attention to a Woodlark amongst them—no mistaking its short, stumpy figure and conspicuous eye-streak. Fieldfares are snatching greedily at the few remaining haws. Every stackyard has its hungry host of finches and yellow-hammers. Only the Snow Buntings seem to be in their element, as if fancying themselves back in their far northern home. The glass shows that some, no doubt the old birds, are whiter than others, and that, on the ground, they take short, quick runs, more after the fashion of mice than birds. With clatter of wings a great flock of Wood Pigeons takes flight, already so hungry that they will return to fill their crops with turnip-tops although repeatedly fired at. A striking figure is that of an old hare as he sits bolt upright just on the sky-line in the middle of a perfectly white snow-field. Bad times are these for game of all sorts, as the partridges experience, for the snow renders them plainly visible to their enemies.

Next day the tide of migration has slackened; by the third day it has spent itself. Yet, doubtful as is the fate of those birds which have fled, the

comparatively few which remain are still more to be pitied as day by day passes and the frost still holds. True, the snow vanishes from southern slopes in slowly trickling streams which are turned to ice again each night. It is sad to see the Lapwings, miserably tame, on the frozen meadows, listening in vain for upward movement of earthworm responsive to their tread. In the woods, where evergreens have kept off much of the snow, the Redwings, weak and dejected, hop about under shelter of the thick holly clumps, feebly searching for food amongst the dead leaves. On the lake Coots and other wild fowl by constant movement manage to keep open a hole in the ice. The gamekeeper almost tires of shooting the Jays which come to the pheasants' corn. But the turnips are now the last resort of the destitute ; rooks, jackdaws and wood-pigeons peck holes in the bulbs ; fieldfares, thrushes and blackbirds follow or betake themselves to the folds where the sheep are hand-fed and where, consequently, fragments of turnip may be picked up. Upon the coast many thrushes frequent the rocks which are uncovered at low tide and feed upon shell-fish, breaking their hard shells with difficulty. Soon want does its woeful work and we begin to pick up dead birds—redwings are likely to be the first. Birds have, however, such a habit of getting away into holes and crevices to die, that the real rate of mortality is never known.

Amongst the crowd of weak, crippled, or half-starved birds which throng wherever food is provided for them, skylarks, even rooks and lapwings, find a place. Many suffer from frost-bitten feet; several starlings still come although unable to stand, and a great-tit afflicted with club-foot is a never-failing pensioner. The hardy finches and buntings, which burrow into the sides of the stacks to find shelter from the bitter weather, suffer comparatively little, but insect-eating birds, such as the few pipits and wagtails which remain, are reduced to sore straits. The plucky little Stonechats, snowed out of the cliff-slopes, flit tame and robin-like about the sands. The Grey Wagtail seeks factory-pools or spring-heads, which remain unfrozen, and Wrens come indoors seeking shelter. As inland waters become completely ice-bound, the wild-fowl desert them entirely and make their way to the coast. In great frosts they do not linger there, but go much farther south, perhaps to the *marismas* of Andalusia, or the wide, shallow lakes on the northern borders of the Sahara. Thus it was noticed that in the great frost of 1895 there were few brent-geese or other wild-fowl on the Essex coast.

But, on the other hand, many seabirds which ordinarily winter in the Spitzbergen seas, such as the Iceland and Ivory Gulls, the Little Auk, and the Northern or Brünnich's Guillemot, are recorded upon the East coast, showing how wide is the area affected

by the exceptional cold. Thus February, 1895, brought an unprecedented visitation of Little Auks, small diving birds closely related to our razor-bill. The newspapers begin to take note of the effects of the long-continued frost upon animal life, and record how rooks and gulls are so reduced as to seek food in the streets, and how red-grouse, driven from the moors by the weather, have appeared in many lowland localities. Of special interest to Londoners are the gulls which in large numbers frequent the Thames between Black-friars Bridge and Waterloo.

The hardened powdery snow no longer shows the foot-prints of passing bird and beast as in its earlier days. So the great frost runs its course, sometimes to break up and give way before a sudden invasion of westerly airs, but often to wear out slowly, yielding almost imperceptibly before the increasing power of the sun, unaided by moisture-laden winds—a hardly-won victory, so nearly is the ground gained each day lost during the succeeding night. But at last the land lies bare once more, faded and colourless as after a long spell of east winds. A few thrushes and other birds straggle back to their usual haunts, and we are able to take stock of our losses. A memento of the past long remains in the whitened stems of trees, from which the rabbits gnawed the bark when the snow cut off other food supplies, leaving the wood bare as high up as they could reach. The willow-branches which

Robin. Great Tit.

BIRDS ATTRACTED BY COCO-NUTS.

Photo—O. G. Pike.

overhang the pool have been treated in the same way by the water-voles.

This year of disaster has left its mark upon the numbers of almost all resident birds ; all in fact have paid more or less heavy toll, excepting the grain-feeders, such as greenfinches and yellow-hammers, which have tided over the evil times by hanging round the barn-doors and rick-yards. How few the thrushes and blackbirds are the coming spring will show when one scarcely finds a nest in their favourite hedges. But few stonechats remain. Goldfinches have become scarcer. Some of our well-known robins are absent from their wonted haunts. The smallest birds—long-tailed tits, tree-creepers, wrens, goldcrests—though relatively to their size they appear to stand the cold so well—are fewer than formerly. Some species are practically wiped out for the time being. After the frost of 1895, nine months elapsed before we saw a single mistle-thrush. A succession of open winters was needed to bring their numbers once more to the normal. The bird-stuffer reports thirty-five kingfishers, mostly frozen, brought to him within three days. While the cold kept the small rodents from stirring abroad, the owls suffered badly. No large bags of partridges will be made in the autumn ; some are picked up all skin and bone. The farmers remark that few hares are left. Woodpeckers are decimated ; herons much thinned in numbers. Even the buzzards suffer, the frost driving

them from the hill country to the lowlands, where they fall victims to the gamekeeper. So widespread are the effects of a few weeks of weather of a type for the like of which our ordinary winters leave the birds unprepared, encouraging them to linger till the unexpected occurs, bringing disaster in its train. But fortunately these spells of relentless cold are few, and it is rare for two such to occur in successive winters, while so soon are the gaps refilled when times of plenty return that the numbers of our resident birds are in no case permanently affected.

CALENDAR FOR JANUARY.

January 1st.—Mistle Thrush sings.
,, 3rd.—Robin sings.
,, 4th.—Hedge Sparrow and Wren sing.
,, 8th.—Cirl Bunting sings.
,, 12th.—Blackbird begins to sing.
,, 14th.—Ring Dove coos.
Song Thrushes in full song.
,, 18th.—Great Tit's spring note heard.
,, 20th.—Tree Creeper sings.
Blue Tit's spring note heard.
,, 22nd.—Common or Corn Bunting sings.
,, 25th.—Rooks coquetting.
,, 26th.—Partridges pair.
,, 27th.—Woodlark sings.
,, 30th.—Stock Dove coos.
,, 31st.—Ring Dove feeds on ivy-berries.

Bird Life in February

Bird Life in February

Difficult as it is to find any constant traits to characterise January, not less of an uncertain quantity is the second month in the year's chaplet. On the one hand, its days, so evidently lengthening, may be full of hopeful tokens, in the shape of budding shrubs and thickening tree-tops, that the sap is on the rise, while in a less genial season its sullen skies, with a cold, damper and more penetrating than that of frosty January, may bring the worst of the winter. Not only is there no advance, but it seems at times as if spring had recalled its pickets and ceased even to threaten winter's reign. How sere and colourless are the landscapes under drear February skies before the grass shows any new growth and when one must search the most sheltered hollow for half a dozen stray primroses. Look on this picture and then on that of a February such as that of 1891, sunny throughout, and practically rainless in the London district. Yet, apart from extremes, the month has a character of its own. Its place is between the frost and the east winds. The sun which tempers its humid airs draws a daily increasing volume of song from the thrushes and

brings the first bees to the crocuses. A change of colour and of consistency passes over the tree-tops as they begin to show the purples and browns of swelling buds. The month of general awakening is to come, but is anticipated by the first sporadic revivals. Blind-worms and newts still sleep in heaps of loose stones and piles of rubbish, but the toad is once more abroad at dusk and the surface of the pond is rippled by spawning frogs, which puff out their lily-white throats and croon a resonant double bass. The running spiders which race over bank sides are always the first to respond by their re-appearance to the revivifying warmth of the sun. Down at the brook we welcome the "skaters" (*Hydrometra*), which run upon the surface of the water, and the whirligig-beetles, which again weave their mazy dance, foretokens of the great stirring and quickening which is now at hand. Snugly stowed away in winter-quarters insects have nothing to fear from the frost. Split open this dry and hollow stem of hemlock or cow-parsnip, and we shall be surprised at the variety of its tenants—lanky, trans-parent-looking spiders, delicate gauze-winged gnats, and a fat caterpillar which has spun a white web for his greater comfort. So little ground is there for the supposition, so generally held, that a hard winter is fatal to noxious insects. As a matter of fact, they suffer much more when unseasonable warmth tempts them out before their time.

Almost all the happenings in the bird world of February are linked together by their connection with the nesting-season, which, in the case of the Heron and Raven, may be in full swing by the end of the month, while, with a number of others, the earlier stages of courtship or nest-building are reached. Anyone who has a rookery under observation will know the various stages by which its occupants settle down to this, the most serious business of the year. Thus they visit their winter-worn tenements with increasing frequency, spend more time daily in considering the needful repairs, and finally take full possession, henceforth roosting at the rookery and only going as far afield to forage as may be necessary. A knowing ear may at once judge by the increased and altered clamour when this climax has been reached. A February of open weather is tuneful with Thrushes piping to good Saint Valentine and challenging each other from tree to tree. Mistle Thrushes scold harshly and sing in more boisterous stanzas. Robins interrupt their flirting with bouts of fighting. At the very end of the month both they and the thrushes sometimes commence nest-building with ill-considered precipitancy, for few of these early nests come to any good. A late snow-fall causes them to be deserted, or, too evident in the absence of leafy cover, they are laid waste by magpies or jays. It is noticeable that the birds responsible for these early efforts are those which are domiciled in

private grounds, where the lawns afford constant food and the shrubberies ample shelter. No thrush would think of building in the bare hedge-row for a month to come. Watching the flocks of Peewits on moor or fallow, we may notice that many a wanton lapwing who now "gets himself another crest" has also selected a mate. A pair of Water Ouzels, earlier than the rest, may already be carrying moss to the nest which they repair each spring. They work only in the early morning and are not seen in its vicinity during the day. Song Thrushes, Fieldfares and Skylarks have come straggling back since the frost took its departure, only to shift their quarters if a February snowfall occurs, bringing the Golden Plover again to the coast. Linnets, which we so seldom saw in mid-winter, are again in evidence, and in the fields are the first returning parties of Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails.

If the winter has been a severe one, food supplies are now at a low ebb. All the more welcome are the ivy-berries, which ripen in late February or early March. Blackbirds eat them, scattering their undigested seeds broadcast, and from the ivied elm in the lane Wood Pigeons, which have been thinning the blue-black clusters, crash out as we pass. The back of a hovering Kestrel, seen from above, shows as a bright chestnut spot against the hill-side. Magpies pass from orchard to orchard by easy stages, halting now in a hedge-row

and now alighting in a field. Sometimes we meet with large and excited gatherings of from eight to a dozen, the subject under discussion being evidently connected with matters matrimonial. Two jack-hares chase madly over the springing corn, scuffling and boxing, so blind in their rivalry that they will run right up to the feet of an onlooker. A squirrel in his winter coat of brownish-grey, not red as in summer, hunts with quick jerky movements amongst the leaves for a chance acorn, carrying his brush curled up over his back as if to keep it clean and dry. Here by the lake side we come upon a heap of loose, peaty soil nearly a yard across, so much bigger than the mole's ordinary hillocks that it evidently marks the site of his fortress. Opening it up, we find the whole of the mound crossed and re-crossed by a connected system of galleries or tunnels, which, however, exhibit none of the beautifully symmetrical arrangement so often figured. At a depth of ten or twelve inches is the central chamber which contains the nest, a double handful of oak-leaves and pieces of sedge, beautifully dry inside, but untenanted.

On the coast the air is full of the cries of the Curlews after dark, this unusual stir always marking the time of the year when they leave for their breeding-haunts in the hills. The Black-headed Gulls begin to acquire their black hoods, and the Herring Gulls circle slowly round at a great height, uttering their jubilant spring cackle.

It is not want but rather the taste for a dainty spring salad, which brings the Bullfinches every February to the kitchen-garden and orchard, where they nip off the buds of the fruit-trees. Year after year we have to lament this exasperating habit of a favourite bird. Carefully they go over the lilacs, cutting off all hope of a good show of blossom; the cherry-plum and the *pyrus japonica* fare no better. It is useless to plead that they are in quest of insects concealed in the buds; their crops contain a *purée* of greenstuff, without a trace of grub or larva. Equally vain is it to urge that they only take the leaf-buds and leave the fruit-buds; the reverse appears rather to be the case. Our own fondness for the bullfinch would lead us to try anything possible in the way of preventive measures, such as scaring him away or netting the trees, before sending a charge of shot after him, but others no doubt will be disinclined to carry toleration so far. Sometimes a little male Sparrow-hawk with slaty-blue back,sweeping silently through the orchard, spies the offender and gives him short shrift. In town-gardens the House Sparrow now adds to his misdeeds by attacking the crocuses and pecking them to shreds. Is this pure mischief, or does it arise from a desire to sample any early vegetable produce which comes to hand? Some would have us observe that it is only the yellow crocuses which are thus treated, while the white and purple ones are spared, whence they infer in the sparrow

the early dawnings of an æsthetic appreciation of colour. But the snowdrops are sometimes ill-used in the same fashion, so that further data seem to be needed before we can reach a conclusion.

Bird-song gathers strength and volume as the month proceeds. The Blackbird, Chaffinch, and Skylark, whose voices were only occasionally heard in January, now come into full song. The blackbird's notes, quiet, leisurely and mellow, have none of the quick, eager change of phrase characteristic of the thrush, but we have known one individual to be constant to a curious variation, much like the piping of the ring ouzel. Many a dripping February morning is enlivened by the skylarks, which sing madly as the sun gets through the fog. The Yellow-hammers now begin to join in from the hedge-tops, and the Corn Bunting grinds out his monotonous refrain, like the jingling of a bunch of keys. Starlings collect in the tops of the elms and warble in concert. On sunny days the short, shrill song of the Tree Creeper is heard everywhere amongst the old timber, whence also comes the Nuthatch's loud spring whistle.

Meanwhile the Stonechat sings as he flits, all animation, about the tops of the furze, sometimes hovering for a moment like a whitethroat, then perching again as he scolds, with quick, nervous movement of wings and tail. In parts of the country where it occurs, the Woodlark flutes a soft, musical accompaniment to the

skylark's rapturous trill, usually as it flies to-and-fro overhead, but sometimes from the ground or from the branch of a tree. Other songs which are less familiar attract our notice from time to time. Sometimes from the tops of the ash-poles in the copse by the low water-meadows, comes a monotonous piping, "trui, trui, trui," like a poor imitation of the thrush's notes. It is the Redwing's song, little heard or noticed in England but said to be a tuneful and much appreciated accompaniment of the Northern summer. And one bright February day, genial as April, we heard proceeding from the alders by the brook, a merry, rippling string of notes ending with a long drawn out "tze-e-e." The glass showed the gold-banded wing and green back of a cock Siskin. There was quite a party of them, some hanging from the twigs extracting the seed from the alder-cones. From one, then from another, sometimes from three at once, would come the brisk linnet-like song with, as finish, the squeal which attested its authorship. It was the only occasion upon which we have heard the siskin singing in a state of freedom; as a cage-bird its song is familiar enough.

In February, the spring notes of the various tits resound through the woods, most persistent of bird voices. Heard at intervals in the late autumn, then silenced by the frost, they now break out into a hundred variations of the same refrain, with all the spirit and energy inspired by the milder weather and

the lengthening days. On all hands they are tinkering at kettles, and tiny anvils ring under their sounding strokes. The loudest performer is naturally the Great Tit, whose note is said to resemble the sound produced by sharpening a saw with a file, an operation to which, it must be confessed, chance has never given us the opportunity of listening. The Coal Tit reiterates his "sista-wéet, sista-wéet"; a like spring-fever seizes the Blue Tit, and amongst the pollard willows by the weir the Marsh Tit is taking his turn as a variety artiste. For an individual tit of any one of these four species will invent some fresh variation and practise it all day long, to forget it completely next morning and hark back to its more familiar note. So much is this the case that anything novel in call-notes incessantly repeated, and especially if having about it the resonance of hammered metal, seldom puzzles us, being at once attributed to the versatile genius of a tit, either large or small. It is true that we have been deceived once or twice into imagining that the chiff-chaff or the tree pipit had arrived before its time, till a sight of the author proved that it was merely a tit favouring his woodland audience with the latest addition to his repertoire. Thus, many as are the tunes and impossible as it is to remember them in detail, they may usually be recognized by their family likeness and taken together they form a tinkling accompaniment to the minstrelsy of the still leafless woods.

MERE AND FEN.

The epithet of "fill-dyke," applied to the month of February, carries us back to a time when the undrained land lay sodden after the winter rains and every water-course was filled to overflowing by the melting of the snow. A chilly, damp, cheerless England of agues and marsh-fevers it was, but not without its picturesque features, of which the march of improvement has spared us but scant trace in the fen-levels of Cambridgeshire and in the Broad District of Norfolk. It is a land of wide-stretching horizons, compared with which the skies of hilly and mountainous districts seem strangely circumscribed, and your true fenman would not exchange his quiet waters, in their gay setting of yellow flags, arrow-head and flowering-rush, for the livelier humours of North Country trout-stream or Highland torrent. To drink in the spirit of the land, its wide spaciousness and peaceful stillness, we must traverse the vast marsh-pastures, fed over by numberless horses and cattle, amongst which glide the brown sails of boats which move on unseen waterways, or stand in the midst of the one stretch of untamed fen still left to us, whence the towers of Ely cathedral are seen vast and dim to the northward. Elsewhere, only the pumping-station—engine-house or wind-mill—with the straight silver line of the "lode" or "level" into which it pours its contribution of surface waters, shows how much of the black land, now so firm and dry, and bearing

LITTLE GREBE ON NEST.
Photo—O. G. Pike.

such heavy crops of corn and potatoes, was once part and parcel of the deep fen. Its very level has sunk many feet since the epoch when it was a spongy morass. But picture it as it was, when for league upon league the frozen meres gleamed cold in their setting of hoary reeds all tagged with ice, or later when the green feathered spears rustled and bent before the summer breeze which transformed the dreary waste into a jungle of lush and tall-growing herbage, where, side by side with the loosestrifes purple and yellow, the hemp-agrimony and the meadow-rue, grew rare marsh plants, which drainage has almost banished from our flora. Still, at the end of June, the bulrushes give off their clouds of golden pollen, but, with the disappearance of their food plants, some of the insects characteristic of our English Low Countries have become scarce or extinct, a notable example of the latter being the great-copper butterfly, formerly the glory of the Whittlesea fens. Happily, we may still, in one locality at least, see the strong-winged swallow-tail dash across the levels or find its larva, in its brilliant livery of clear green with jet-black stripes spotted with orange red, feeding upon the marsh-parsley or fennel.

But it is in the matter of their bird population that the by-gone glories of the fens contrast most strongly with present-day conditions. Every stage in the reclamation of the drowned levels has still further unfitted them to be the haunt of the great hosts of

wild-fowl which formerly made them their home. True, the tide of disaster has sometimes turned when the dykes have burst and the waters have for a time reclaimed their own, but otherwise the remnants of the marsh-land have, in the opinion of the birds, become year by year more unsuited to their requirements, and they have been driven to seek in Holland or Jutland the congenial solitudes which our own land now fails to provide. The times are indeed changed since Sir Thomas Browne could sally out of Norwich and return in a few hours with his pockets filled with eggs of the crane and great-bustard ; when Fulham on the Thames was, as its name implies, the fowls'-home where, amongst other wild-fowl, the spoonbills bred, and when the fenman could count upon a bittern for his Sunday's dinner. The booming of the Bittern—one of the most weird sounds in nature—is no longer heard, though with every spell of keen frost bitterns from the Continent revisit the Welsh bogs, and show such a tendency to linger till spring in favourite spots in other parts of the country that it seems probable that if unmolested, an occasional pair would breed with us even at the present day.* But a century has elapsed since the Grey Geese ceased to linger to nest in the Lincolnshire fens, and nearly as long since the last colony of noisy Avocets gave way before persecution,

* Thanks to efficient protection, the Bittern has returned to the Norfolk Broads, where, in a limited area, no less than thirteen pairs are known to have nested this year (1923).

though a stray specimen still crosses, not unfrequently, from Holland, to scoop its food with flexible, upturned bill from the surface of East Anglian mud-flats. And it is not so long since a naturalist watched fourteen Spoonbills running about restlessly on a sandy spit, shovelling up the mud with their "spoons." They spent most of the day there, and were actually not molested. Gone, too, as a breeding species, is the Black-tailed Godwit; gone more recently the Black Terns, "blue darrs" of the fenman, which used to hawk dragonflies above the lily-grown shallows, and breed in colonies about the meres, as the Black-headed Gull continues to do at the present day. Old fenmen remember when the Marsh Harrier or Bald Buzzard used to quarter the wet meadows regularly like a pointer, and describe having seen the ducks make for the river when pursued by it, and dive as it stooped at them. Gone are the Ruffs which used to meet in tourney, trampling bare their favourite "hills," as with heads down and shields erected they sparred at each other like angry bantam-cocks, each taking as his share as many of the plainer Reeves as his prowess might win. A few harassed birds may still linger, for eggs were taken in 1884, and perhaps later.

So much for our losses, and now for the brighter side of the picture. The exquisite little Bearded Tits, once brought to a low ebb, seem to be no longer in danger of extinction. Their chief peril lies in the fact that every

marshman knows that collectors will pay well for their eggs. Savi's Warbler, which used to reel from some tall reed even more loudly and persistently than the grasshopper-warbler, visits us no more, but the Reed Warbler still slings its cradle between the upright spears in every ditch, and from similar shelter comes the grunting squeal of the Water Rail, whose narrowly compressed body seems made to slip between the tussocks of sedge from which only a good water-dog will dislodge it. The silvery-breasted Grebes still hold their own; we hear of twenty-three in sight at once upon a single broad. Owing to protection afforded by one or two landed proprietors, ducks such as the Gadwall, Pochard and Tufted Duck, breed in Norfolk in much larger numbers and greater variety at the present day than was the case fifty years ago. In one district it is stated that the Garganey nests even more commonly than the Teal. There is still the buzzing of multitudinous Snipe and the piping of unnumbered Redshanks. The blue-grey Montagu's Harrier, with his darker "ring-tail" mate, still at least attempts to nest annually. The Short-eared Owl lays its eggs upon a heap of cut reeds, and the Kestrel, in the absence of trees, has been known to nest upon the ground in the middle of the fen. Thus there is still left no small residue of the wild life of the waterside.

Let us leave the broad reach of Bure or Yare, where

the wherrymen "quant" toilsomely, and push our punt up this narrow-side stream between the tall and thick-set reeds, giving place here and there to tumps of sedge between which are unknown depths of mire. A black-capped Reed Bunting chirps from a bending osier twig. A pike goes out from the shallows with a swirl, and here floats a dead roach with a wound in its shoulder, where it has been stabbed by the Heron's bayonet. Our boatman tells how the bill of a fine old male heron turned orange and crimson with sudden flushes of rage as it fought with a dog when wounded. On either hand one hears Coots, quarrelsome as always, scuffling in the reeds. A Water Rail, surprised amongst the sedge, takes wing, showing its red bill as it flies. As our lane of water opens out upon a quiet expanse, coots scatter hastily for cover, dabchicks bob beneath the surface and moorhens splash away, leaving silvery tracks, or oar their way more quietly to the shelter of the reeds. They show some sagacity in the choice of sites for their nests, sometimes building them up to a height of eighteen inches to be prepared for a sudden rise of the water, or even, after repeated losses on account of floods, nesting in the bushes overhanging the stream. After dark the air is full of quackings and of the calls of various wading birds then upon the move.

The "broad" in question is rapidly becoming filled up by a tangled mass of the stiff-leaved floating plant known

as the water-soldier. Its further end, where it branches into three or four secluded arms, is the site of a duck decoy. Here, enclosing and following the course of one of these branches, is a decoy pipe, a long, curving framework of light arches, covered in with strong wide-meshed netting, and becoming lower and narrower the further we go from its mouth, though, as we stand by its wide-arched entrance, some ten feet high and fifteen across, the far extremity is unseen by us as by the hapless duck which swims in, unwotting of sudden and violent death awaiting it not a hundred yards away. One side of the pipe is merely sheltered by a straight reed-fence, the other, upon which it is intended to be worked, by the well-known arrangement of reed-screens placed obliquely, the open ends being about a yard apart. Between each pair of these open ends is a low connecting piece of boarding, the " dog-jump " over which the decoy-man's canine assistant leaps to arouse the curiosity of the ducks. Viewed from the mouth of the pipe, these screens give the impression of a continuous reed-wall, the openings, of course, fronting the other way. The pipe is fifty or sixty yards long, and at its far end not more than two feet wide. Further round the margin of the lake are three similar pipes, each following the course of a shallow reedy inlet. A decoy must consist of several, as the ducks will only swim to windward. Beside a small hut near at hand are hanging up four or five of the tunnel-nets which

are fixed on at the narrow end of the pipe when a haul is made. These are ordinary bow-nets, eight or ten feet in length. The hut is intended for the temporary disposal of the fowl after a successful working. The decoy-man tells of fourteen hundred ducks having once been taken in a week.

Apart from the special features of the Fen Country as a limited area, much of the old waterside life of bird and insect and plant is still to be found, but we must search for it more widely—by rippling brooks of the southern shires, about the quiet upper reaches of the Thames, or on the banks of slow midland streams, whose sluggish surface is only disturbed by the plunging of a water-vole or the rising of a fish. We shall find it where the mill-water forms a still lakelet, water-lily grown, or beside the moats which encircle the old timbered houses of the western shires. Even commercial activity and increase of population have had the unforeseen result of providing new haunts for aquatic birds. There is scarcely a sea-bird—gull, tern or wader—which does not visit at one time or another the great canal reservoirs near the watershed of Trent and Severn. The Crested Grebes have in fact made themselves as much at home there as in the Broad District itself. Moreover, the vast water-schemes of Liverpool, Birmingham and other great cities have furnished a series of noble lakes which hold out fresh and increasing attractions to water-fowl.

Sewage farms, too, are much frequented by gulls and by wading birds, such as redshanks, ringed plover, and dunlin, especially in time of frost, when they do not readily freeze. So that the prospect of our retaining as British birds all the more interesting elements of the Fenland avifauna still left to us may be said to have distinctly improved within the past few years.

CALENDAR FOR FEBRUARY.

February 5th.—Blackbird begins to sing more regularly.
" 6th.—Chaffinch sings.
" 7th.—Pied Wagtails begin to return.
" 8th.—Woodlark sings.
" 10th.—Skylark sings more frequently.
" 12th.—Grey Wagtail returns to its nesting haunts in the hills.
" 15th.—Coal Tit's spring note heard.
" 16th.—Some Long-tailed Tits paired
" 20th.—Yellow-hammer sings.
" 20th.—Water Ouzels begin to build.
Nuthatch's spring whistle heard
" 21st.—Some Lapwings paired.
" 25th.—Goldcrest sings.
" 27th.—Curlew leave the coast for the hills.
Meadow Pipits begin to return.
" 28th.—Golden Plover returns to the moors.
Rooks build.
Early pairs of Ravens have eggs.

Bird Life in March

Bird Life in March

With March the naturalist's year opens. February may fail to bring a single genial sun-warmed hour, but there always comes a day in March when on the south side of the spinney, with the north-easter unfelt, though heard amongst the oak boughs aloft, it is spring in more than name. In the minds of those who are much in the open, the bluff month still holds its proud position and leads off the calendar. For the dead days of winter are over and the time of stir and movement has begun. There will still at times be leaden skies, days when the land lies dry and bare, scorched by the breath of the east wind, and when only the "palm," which flecks with yellow the side of the still leafless cover, tells of coming spring. But there are also days when the kindly gleam of sun strikes across the new-turned furrows, when the shadows of the white cloud-piles race over the downs and a thousand soaring skylarks burst into song. For the wind, "which hurls the rooks across the skies" and piles the drifted leaves in every sheltered corner, dries at last the lanes and field-paths which have lain foul and heavy since the melting of the snow. It is possible to

revisit one's favourite haunts without a struggle with mud and mire. The stronger light shows off to advantage the plumage of our smaller birds, and foliage does not yet hide those which spend most of their time amongst the twigs and branches. Plumage is now at its best, for the nesting season is at hand, or, in some cases, actually begun. The birds which have wintered with us are in full song, and towards the end of the month fresh voices tell of the arrival of returning wanderers from over seas. In the bird-world renewed energies and fresh activities give to the month its key-note.

Whilst several of our resident birds begin to sing in February or even earlier, March brings a large accession to the volume of song. The Mistle Thrush seems to defy the shrill blast to drown his loud, harsh notes, so often heard in dark, rough weather, or when the north-easter rocks his perch amongst the topmost boughs of the elm, that his country name of "storm-cock" seems more than usually appropriate. The Song Thrush and Blackbird towards the end of the month are too much occupied with nesting duties to sing much, and are then chiefly heard at dawn and for a short time before and after sunset. All day long the Chaffinch rattles out his lively challenge, while the leisurely strains of the Robin form a sort of under-current of song. Greenfinches trill in the orchard, and the cock-bird begins the long-drawn call-note

which is the refrain of his love-song. On every hedge top the Yellow-hammer demands his "little bit of bread and no chēēse." The Skylark is never in better voice than in the burst of sun which follows a short March squall of hail or sleet as the leaden-hued cloud-piles roll away. Lastly, the Tits seem to surpass themselves and ring a hundred changes on their ordinary spring notes.

This increase of song heralds the approach of the breeding season, and the other events which we note this month have an evident connection with the same important epoch. The flocks of finches, buntings and larks, which have ranged over the stubbles and hung about the stackyards through the winter, now break up into pairs. The change is a gradual one and does not take place in a day. There seems to be a good deal of variation in the date at which individuals of the same species feel the nesting impulse. Several pairs of Ring Doves (our well-known Wood Pigeon) may be breeding in the fir plantation while flocks of their kindred on the neighbouring fields show no indication of nesting. Sometimes, as we watch a flock of Lapwings on moor or meadow, a pair will separate from the rest and swoop overhead with excited cries of "pee-wit," screaming and tumbling as if already nesting. The family parties of Long-tailed Tits which have ranged the woods all through the winter are no longer seen, but pairs may be met

with prospecting for nesting-sites in furze-bush or blackthorn hedge. Starlings are still flocking, and, though most of them will be nesting early next month, a limited number seem to shelve matrimonial duties, for they may be seen in small flocks all through April and May. In fact, the breaking up of the winter associations of small birds is by no means completed when March goes out.

Free to roam at will through the winter, many birds now seek their special nesting haunts. The Jackdaws are again noisy round the crumbling ruins of the abbey or the clefts and crevices of the limestone crag. The Kingfisher leaves the marsh ditches, and is seen again on the brook in the neighbourhood of the steep bank in which it excavates its burrow. Mountain and moor, which a month ago were deserted but for the noisy crowings and restless flights of the Red Grouse, again have their summer tenants. The Curlew whistles once more over the barren uplands and the Golden Plover's plaintive call comes from the dreary bog-lands. The Grey Wagtail seeks the merry north-country "beck" or Welsh trout-stream, to nest behind a tuft of fern on the moist ledges, having for neighbour the Dipper or Water Ouzel, whose nursery, a big flattened, dome-shaped structure of moss, lined with oak-leaves, is placed almost in the spray of the fall. On the coast Cormorants seek the pinnacled "stack," which for generations they have

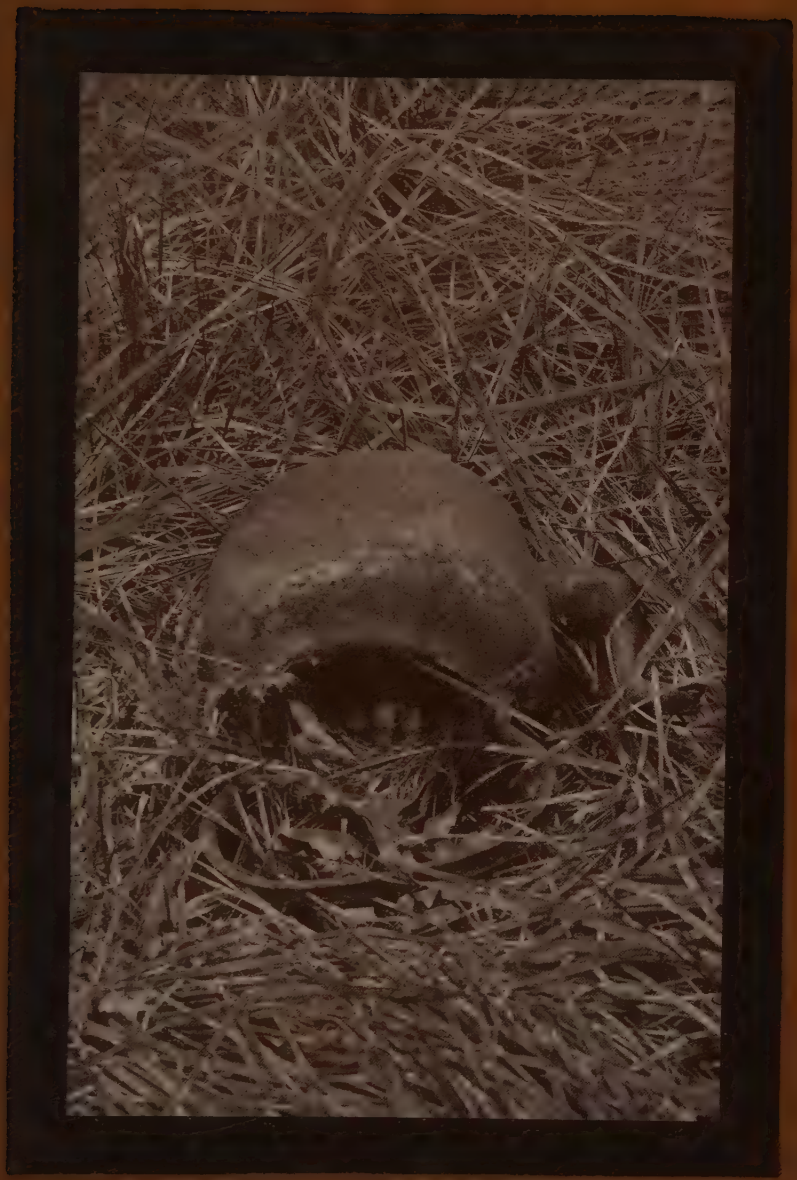
whitened and strewed with nesting-litter, while Herring Gulls cackle about their nesting ledges, and Ringed Plover and Oyster-catchers betake themselves to the shell-beaches and shingle-banks to scratch out the artless hollows which serve them as nests.

Putting aside abnormal instances which furnish the regular crop of "early nesting" paragraphs to the newspapers, recording how some ill-advised robin or thrush has been found sitting upon eggs in Christmas week, it may safely be said that the Heron and the Raven are the earliest of our native birds to breed. Even in January, if the weather is open, Herons resort to their nests, and in the mild climate of the south of Ireland young are often hatched by the first of March. Though the solitary fisher is no longer protected as royal game, there are at the present day few counties which cannot boast one or more heronries. One of these, if visited in the breeding-season, presents a scene full of interest and animation. The tree-tops are studded with the great nests, off which the sitting birds come awkwardly scuffling, each, as it gets fairly under weigh, taking a turn round overhead, crying "kronk," or "kraak," and making such uncanny noises as herons only can. Other old birds stand, gaunt and angular, upon their nests, spots of blue grey against the dark foliage of pine or fir. The young in the nests clap their bills loudly; older ones stand upright, steadying themselves awkwardly with

their wings as they add to the uproar, until one, overbalancing, flutters to the ground, clutching and flapping. More than one brood appears to be reared, for the herons are still about their nests in July.

In parts of the country where the Raven still exists, as amongst the fells of the north and west or the cliffs of the south coast, the birds may be seen at the beginning of March, or even earlier, carrying sticks and other nesting materials to the favoured site, which is usually tenanted year after year. A hardy outlaw is the bird of Odin ; in Wales we have often found the hen bird sitting while snow-drifts still lay in the hollows and icicles hung from the rocks. By the middle of the month the Common Buzzard ("common" no longer save in wild hill-districts beyond the limits of game-preserving) begins to bring sticks and small branches to its nest.

Meanwhile, nearer home, in lanes, shrubbery and garden, nesting is in full progress. The Mistle Thrush places its large, untidy nest in a low fork of some orchard tree. Careless of concealment, it seems to trust to its powers of vituperation to guard its treasure, and great is the outcry if magpie or prowling cat approaches. In the laurels the Song Thrush is rounding off with a smooth lining of touchwood, cemented with cow-dung, the structure which we know so well, soon to contain four or five of the blue, black-spotted eggs, so common and yet so fair to see. The Robin



ROBIN'S NEST IN KETTLE.
Photo—W. Bickerton.

has found a suitable hole amongst dead oak-leaves on the mossy bank, and, in the wood-yard or amongst the pea-sticks which the gardener has piled up for next season's use, the Hedge Sparrow has a snug nursery in which rest those eggs of a hue unlike anything else in nature, neither blue nor green, but a compromise between the two. Joy of the village urchin for untold generations—when did they fail to figure amongst his spoils strung upon a thread by the cottage chimney-piece?

Of the country sounds associated with the present month first and foremost is the cheerful clamour of the rookery. Though in a mild season the Rooks resort to their nests very early in the year, apparently to fix upon sites and settle conflicting claims, it is not as a rule till the closing days of February that they are seen bringing twigs and taking the architectural problem seriously in hand. Then follow the pilfering of building materials, the well-known fights, scuffling and buffeting of wings amongst the tree-tops, while with softened modulations of voice other couples strive to express their hymeneal bliss. The ground is strewn with sticks, lining materials, egg-shells, castings of husks of grain, the branches splashed with guano, worm-skins, grub-exuviæ, as in a community with too much real business on hand to be careful of street sweeping. No country sound is more characteristically English than the brisk uproar of a rookery in

March; abroad such colonies seem to be fewer and their occupants comparatively quiet and subdued.

Meanwhile another early breeder, the Long-eared Owl, deposits its eggs in an old squirrels' "drey" or a deserted nest of some crow or magpie, while the Tawny Owl (the owl which hoots *par excellence*) seeks a hollow tree, to brood in semi-darkness upon her round white treasures.

By the end of the month Lapwings are shaping their nest-hollows on moor and fallow, and a few eggs have been deposited. The hardy Water Ouzel is nesting, as we might expect of a bird which dives and dabbles in cold mountain streams all through the winter, cheerful as a Serpentine bather on Christmas morning. In the latter half of the month the Woodlark may regularly be found nesting upon the warm bracken-covered slopes which it loves. Amongst dead leaves in a bramble-thicket near the margin of the lake, the Wild Duck hides her eggs in a hollow lined with down from her own breast, and in parts of the country where the Woodcock breeds, its eggs may sometimes be found, completing our list of birds whose breeding season falls thus early.

The numbers of several of our familiar birds which do not entirely leave us in winter are now augmented by the return of many of their kindred from the south. How seldom one saw a Pied Wagtail in January, but now, in their dainty spring livery, they swarm upon the

fresh-turned furrows, passing singly and in parties all through the first half of the month. To those who know the Meadow Pipit, its return to the water-meads in straggling flocks is as familiar a feature of the month as the re-appearance of the wagtails. The Linnets twittering and singing in the ash, the black-capped Stonechats on the furze, all, or a large proportion of them, were absent while frost and snow held sway, though their quest of warmth and sunshine may only have carried them to the neighbourhood of the South Coast. Few have any idea of the extent to which these local movements of birds occur within the United Kingdom.

It is not until near the close of the month that we look for the return of the first of the summer migrants, or birds of passage, whose annual wanderings have a far wider range. The first to be reported, from warrens, stony fallows, or the sand-dunes of the coast, is almost invariably the grey-backed Wheatear, which by the end of the month flicks its white tail and utters its sharp " chack, chack," in many a rocky mountain solitude. A few days later the Chiffchaff, a slim little warbler, olive-green above and lighter below, may be seen darting into the air for insects from the twigs of a yellow-catkined willow or repeating its monotonous distich amongst the tender green of budding larches. Its arrival puts the seal to the promise of March, for the chiffchaff, and not the cuckoo, is the true harbinger of

spring. A few Sand Martins, skimming over lake or river in the closing days of the month, give rise to the "early swallow" paragraphs in the newspapers. The Ring Ouzel, the white-breasted "moor blackbird," sometimes reaches the fells thus early, and in the south of England the hawk-like call of the Wryneck may be heard, but the great wave of migration is still to come and will spread itself over the coming six weeks.

THE MONTH OF AWAKENING.

THE March sunshine, which sees such a stir in the bird world, serves to revivify much of the small populace of field and wood. True, it is an inconstant month which does not know its mind, and, after harking back to winter pure and simple, may end in relenting mood by borrowing two or three days from April and giving us a few sunlit hours with the temperature in the neighbourhood of 65°. Then, indeed, there is a magic awakening, not only of the furred and scaled, but of insect hosts which hum and creep and fly. Our native animals present few instances of hibernation in the sense of a deep and unbroken winter sleep. The squirrel is abroad from time to time all through the winter, and often in severe weather. But the hedgehog has certainly been in retirement, and now unrolls, drowsy and rather unsteady at first, to root for grubs in the garden paths at dusk. A rustle in the hedge-bottom and a tiny vibrant squeak tell that the

PEEWIT AND HER NEST.
Photo—W. Bickerton.

shrew is abroad. On the first mild evening one may watch once more the wavering flight of the small bat or pipistrelle. Curled up amongst dead fern on the heath, the adder, very sluggish as yet, suns its scaly coils, and on warm banks the lizard basks. From the pond comes the smothered "croc, croc" of spawning toads. Half-awakened wood-ants cluster in masses about the entrance to their nest. The yellow-catkined sallows are humming with bees. Across the meadow, above the heads of the dancing daffodils, races one of their number which has taken to itself wings—the first brimstone butterfly. It is a wintry March which does not bring forth at least one butterfly. The first adventurer is often the peacock or small-tortoiseshell. There is nothing strange in their appearance as, like the brimstone, they have been sleeping since last autumn, waiting for the few sunny hours which call them, sometimes all too soon, to fresh life. Even the banded hedge-snails, making their appearance at the first shower, are welcome as the damper and milder air which brings them forth.

A change of this sort, a kindly breath from the south-west after a long spell of east winds, has a marked effect upon the feathered choir. The early morning concert of blackbirds and thrushes recommences with new vigour. Skylarks and chaffinches, long delaying, burst at length into full song. For song in its beginnings is tentative, suggesting a distant vision of

spring days to come and of the joys of the nesting season rather than any lively hope of their near fruition. The Thrush's early efforts in late autumn are often unworthy of him, but with the new year comes an improvement. In March he sings with conviction, for are not the tree-tops thick with buds and the catkins hanging from every bush ? But a sudden snow squall whitens the ground, and while it lasts all voices are stilled. Not for long, however ; a cheery optimism is rooted in the feathered breast ; a break in the clouds and the soft snow vanishes like magic to the tune of " cheer-up, cheer-up, cheer-up," " told you so, told you so, told you so." " 'Tis the wise thrush, he sings each song thrice over," and in fact all must have noticed that in singing our friend of the spotted breast has a preference for triplicate phrase. Repetition of this kind is characteristic of many songs. A nightingale, listened to last spring, ran on with his " jug, jug, jug," for more than thirty times without a pause. The pied-wagtail's song is little more than a reiteration, with variations, of its call note of " chizzick," often delivered while the performer executes a sort of aerial dance, with brisk movement of wings and tail. That song does not rise at once to high-water mark is well seen in the case of the Chaffinch, which begins to sing with the first bright day in February. The first attempt ends in something very like a break-down, for the notes are too few and lack the

proper ending. Convinced that there is something wrong both with time and tune, the chaffinch then begins to practise, and in a week or so, having got "the hang of the thing," trolls out the rollicking catch which we hear from every budding orchard tree. There is, too, individual variation, some birds being gifted above their fellows. This fact is well-known to the bird-keeping fraternity in many of our large towns, where a "chaffinch contest" is a popular fixture, the award going to the owner of the bird which can rattle out the complete number of notes most frequently in a given time.

Is there in bird-song anything comparable to dialect and provincial accent? Most certainly, and the chaffinch again gives a case in point, for local variations may be noticed even in Britain, and abroad they become much more marked. In a German forest the chaffinches ended their song with a sharp "tchick" which we never hear in England. In the chiffchaff's simple ditty, which gives the bird its name, there seems little scope for variation, yet hearing it in the Pyrenees one may well feel a doubt as to authorship, and in the Canary Islands may quite fail to recognize the performer. Individual thrushes, too, have a preference for certain notes. Did not one particular bird weary us by his ceaseless offer of "fresh herrin', fresh herrin'" from the elm-tops all through a sunny June? But the thrush is an artiste, and in the spring choir there are of course

voices of less compass and of more limited powers. The Hedge Sparrow's song always seems the same, whether heard as the sun breaks throught on a misty autumn morning, setting the dew-drops sparkling on every furze-bush, or when the snowy hawthorns tell of spring in its prime. The Wren, too, whose sudden burst of song seems too loud for so small a throat, favours us to the same performance, his sole instrument the clarionet, right through the year. The Tree Creeper, which climbs mouse-like up the trunks and round the branches of the oaks, is no bigger than the wren; how many know its short but joyous contribution of song, which may be heard all day long in bright weather early in the year? Another song which must be listened for is that of the Goldcrest, a small voice as befits its author of the golden coronet, tiniest of British birds. Yet, when recognized, it may be heard persistently in March coming from the firs or the larch plantation. Has the Bullfinch a true song? If so, the writer has never heard it except once from a bird in captivity, and in this case the notes may have been acquired.*

Another element in bird song is imitation. This is sometimes evident in the case of the Thrush, which will pick up familiar farm-yard sounds, such as the clucking of a hen. The story is well known how, in the neighbourhood of one of the old monasteries, the

* The song, since heard, is very low, though mellow and pleasing.

thrushes, listening to the chanting of the monks at vespers and prime, acquired and repeated the oft-heard refrain. But in this line our leading performer is unquestionably the Starling—the troubadour of the chimney-pots, giving to the term its true meaning of one who invents or improvises as he sings. Who does not know the starling on the roof or up in the elm tops as he sings, whistling, piping, wheezing and flapping his wings ? This is genuine starling minstrelsy and all his own, but in early spring he runs over the whole repertoire of sounds which he has picked up at one time or another, interweaving them with his true notes in a series of reminiscences or character sketches. One starling gave a life-like rendering of the corn-crake, another hit off the green woodpecker's cry to a nicety, a third mimicked the yellow-hammer, and threw in one of the brown owl's notes. At the curlew's call we have looked up, to find that the only " curlew " in sight is the starling on the chimney-top. These powers of mimicry are of course shared by the starling with the members of the crow family, to which it is so nearly related.

Such are some of the ideas called forth by the first outburst of song in March. But bird minstrelsy is by no means confined to spring or to the breeding season, and this will appear (with the possible exception of tuneless August) as we trace the fortunes of our feathered acquaintances through the ensuing months.

CALENDAR FOR MARCH

March 4th.—Raven nests.
,, 5th.—Curlew and Golden Plover return to the moors.
,, 10th.—Lapwings begin to cry and tumble.
Pied Wagtails return.
,, 12th.—Greenfinch begins its drawling note.
,, 20th.—Tawny Owl nests.
Meadow Pipits return.
,, 21st.—Rook nests.
,, 24th.—Mallard or Wild Duck nests.
,, 26th.—Magpie builds.
Long-eared Owl nests.
Woodlark nests.
Wheatear arrives.
,, 27th.—Dipper or Water Ouzel nests.
,, 28th.—Blackbird builds.
Carrion Crow builds.
Mistle Thrush nests.
,, 29th.—Song Thrush nests.
,, 30th.—Chaffinch builds.
Hedge Sparrow nests.
Lapwing or Peewit nests.
,, 31st.—Ring Dove builds.
Robin nests.
Chiffchaff arrives.

Bird Life in April

KENTISH PLOVERS AND THEIR NESTING PLACE.
From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

Bird Life in April

Like March, April is a month of moods many and varied, many-sided as the aspects of bird-life with which it presents us. Popularly associated with showers, how often do the harsh, dry winds hold sway, so that only the closing days of the month bring the short-lived downpour, followed by the burst of sunshine, during which the buds seem to swell visibly, and the willow-wrens sing on every side. Who has not qualified the poet's "Oh, to be in England now that April's there!" with a strong desire to be somewhere else where the tooth of the east wind is less keen? Yet who would miss an April, though her frowns be more than tears or smiles? In virgin freshness of leaf and flower, and, when in happy mood, in clearness of her laughing skies, she remains the poet's month, and in the naturalist's memory every one of her thirty days is marked with a white stone. For now nesting is in full progress, bringing into play marvels of inherited instinct and showing varied traits of "the mind behind the feathers" which are little in evidence at other times of the year. Now a crowd of returning songsters re-peoples copse and thicket, welcome as

long absent friends who fill once more the accustomed niche after wintering in Egypt or on the Riviera.

But, before we welcome the coming, let us speed the parting guests, to wit, the feathered hosts which made a descent last autumn upon our English woods and waters to escape the rigours of a northern winter, and whose instinct now draws them homeward towards Highland loch or Norwegian *fjeld*. In April the number of wild-fowl upon lake, river and estuary grows daily less. The wild geese, the majority of our winter ducks, such as the Pintail, Wigeon, Pochard and Scoter, Mergansers and Divers, all seek their northern breeding haunts, though some will still be with us until the first or second week of May. The Woodcock is no longer to be flushed from the soft ground under the hollies by the spring-head, where his russet plumage harmonises so well with the carpet of dead leaves. The Jack Snipe has left the patch of swamp where any day since last October we have been able to find him amongst the tufts of tawny sedge. The little green Siskins no longer hang from the twigs of birch and alder as they extract the seed. Under the beeches we look in vain for the Bramblings which, with their near relatives, the chaffinches, have pecked all through the winter at the fallen "mast." With musical call-note and the glint of sunshine on white wings, the Snow Buntings leave our northern coasts. Who knows to what far arctic solitude their summer wanderings may

carry them, for their range in the direction of the Pole exceeds that of any other land bird? In hedge-row elms the Fieldfares chatter noisily as they discuss their approaching journey, while the grey-backed Hooded Crows, which have haunted tidal river or rocky shore through the winter, wing their way more sedately to the north.

In the woods in early April the year still seems to be marking time, so little progress towards leafing do we note from day to day. Only where a shade of green creeps over the larches, have we the look and smell of spring. But there is spring in the air, and birds on all sides answer to the magic call. The ancient Carrion Crow tunes his voice to soft, unwonted modulations, and amorous Jays, discarding their harsh screech, produce a combination of notes almost rising to the level of a song. Magpies cough and chuckle as, with the thorniest of twigs, they seek to render impregnable their stick-built fortress in the larch.

There is spring in the Nuthatch's clear whistle and in his sounding taps upon the oak bough, while the Ring Dove, leaving his perch with clap of wings, shoots upward, remains motionless for a moment on expanded pinions, and then glides downwards as if on an inclined plane of air. Now also in the still woods is heard that curious jarring sound, as of a tree trunk suddenly rent, which is the Spotted Woodpecker's call to his mate. The Green Woodpecker chuckles joyously and

seeks the hillocks where the wood-ants are stirring. By the cover-side two cock Pheasants are fighting, sparring at each other with their wings. Suddenly there is uproar in the woods, the scream of mistle-thrushes and the squalling of jays. The disturbers of the peace have descried a Brown Owl, drowsing away the noontide against a tree-trunk, and will hurl contumely and vituperation at him until he takes refuge in flight. In the thicket where the blackthorn blossoms shows snow-white, a pair of Long-tailed Tits are finishing off their nest, the well-known barrel-shaped structure, studded with lichens exteriorly and a perfect feather bed within. Not less exquisite in shape and finish is the mossy cradle which a pair of Goldcrests have attached to the underside of one of the pendant branches of a spruce fir. Where the white crags of the old limestone quarry show through the screen of leafing beeches, there is stir and clamour. Jackdaws dart into their nest-holes in noisy crowds, keeping up a continual chatter. Vociferous Starlings hurry to-and-fro. A pair of Kestrels, toying and squealing overhead, are preparing to nest in one of the crevices, having as solemnly grotesque neighbours a pair of White Owls, while another hollow, under the overhanging roots of a tree, is tenanted by Stock Doves. It is a scene of cheerful bustle such as only the nesting season can show. For to the influence of the season we must credit this overflowing energy

LONG-TAILED TITS AND NESTS.
From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

and exuberant vitality, finding expression in many a drama in which rivalry and the desire to make a brave show in the eyes of a prospective mate are the actuating motives. Listen to the Greenfinch as he trills and drawls all day from the apple bough or takes his wavering nuptial flights from tree to tree. Two cock Chaffinches dart past in mad chase, then scuffle and buffet in the dust of the road, so blind to all but their quarrel that we come within an ace of picking them up. Who does not know the tourney of the street Sparrow, the combatants rolling in a tumbled, yelping heap in the middle of the crocus bed? The cock Yellow-hammer hopping down the path with raised crest, drooping wings and partially spread tail, to show off his spring plumage to best advantage, has an eye only to the plain little hen who to all appearance ignores him utterly. How many have seen the nuptial display of the male Pied Wagtail, when, directing his bill towards the object of his attentions, he waltzes slowly round her in a semicircle, executing a tasteful *pas seul*? In such small comedies do these April days abound.

Before the month has half run its course the birds which breed early begin to hatch. The Hedge Sparrow has converted her blue-green eggs into callow nestlings, which raise orange-red gapes for food as we part the twigs to view them. The young Mistle Thrushes, now too large for their nest, scramble out on to its edge

or on to an adjacent branch, where, with the white down still showing amongst their feathers, they sit with all the wide-eyed solemnity of fledglings who have begun to see the world. An observer with quick trained eye, walking along the lanes, will "spot" every Robin's nest which he passes. It is not the nest itself which is seen, for that lies snugly and deeply in a hole of the bank, but the patch of dead leaves with which the robin carpets what we may call the hall or lobby, the passage leading to its nest. If the bird sits resolutely, the chances are that she is already covering a brood of nestlings, clad in the black down which precedes their feathers. Does pious tradition still throw its ægis over the robin, as was the case in Suffolk, at any rate, forty years ago, when every village boy understood that while other nests were fair game that of the robin must not be touched? Now may be noted an amusing eccentricity of the Wren. Before settling down seriously to house-keeping, a pair of wrens will run up quite a number of nests—in the thatch, in the ivy, in an old shed, anywhere. Not one of them is ever completed or intended to be. The real nest we find later, and usually where we least expect it. The House Sparrow has long been collecting the double handful of feathers, paper, string and oddments in general for which he deems the funnel-shaped receiver of the rain-water pipe the meet receptacle. Chaffinches and Greenfinches are hard at work, yet

with an eye to spare for the labours of the gardener who has just got in the early-sown annuals. Mid-day comes and his back is turned. There is a general adjournment of the finch tribe to the seed-beds. Woe to the mignonette, alas for the prospects of the candy-tuft! By the middle of the month young Woodlarks may be upon the wing. Rather later we see the young Blackbirds, spotted and thrush-like, hopping after the cock-bird for food, and by the end of April numerous hopeful broods are launched upon the world, unwotting of such pitfalls as await them at the hands of boys, cats, weasels and hawks.

But to wander farther afield this stirring April day, through the green water-meadows and along the sunny rippling brook. The willows are humming with bees, and the stream has a margin of widely-open celandines, an embroidered edging in green and gold. Moorhens croak and fight in the cover of the sedges. Watching patiently, one may see the shy Water Rail steal out to feed amongst the cresses of a weed-grown run. A cock Reed Bunting chirps from the osiers, showing his black cap and white collar, and a pair of Kingfishers flash past, the one chasing the other with shrill piping note. Following the stream to the rough boggy pastures in which it takes its rise, we are greeted by the cries of anxious Lapwings, and may note that, while the male bird at once throws himself into the air with frantic tumblings, the hen steals quietly off her

eggs and runs to some distance before she rises. Noisy Redshanks are greatly concerned as to the safety of their nests, which are carefully hidden in the tufts of rushes. A Snipe starts up close before us, rises high into the air till he is a mere speck, then swerves suddenly downwards, making as he descends the well-known buzzing sound, otherwise called "bleating" or "drumming," and believed to be due to the action of the air upon the stiff quills and tail-feathers. No more curious performance marks this month of mating and song. In certain parts of the country the Black-headed Gulls now flock in large numbers to their breeding stations, the meres and "broads" of Norfolk, the "fleets" of the Essex marshes, or the "flows" of the Solway, hovering like a cloud of snowflakes above the chosen site. In similar spots the Wild Duck leads out her brood, and the Coot moors her floating mass of dead flags and rushes to the branch of a fallen tree which stretches out level with the water. The Little Grebe or Dabchick has returned to the reed-fringed pond, and on larger sheets of water the Great Crested Grebe may be seen displaying in full beauty its curious head-gear consisting of a double crest and tippet.

Upon rocky parts of the coast, April is marked by the return to their breeding haunts of a host of sea-fowl, Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins. The loud jubilant cackle of the Herring Gulls is heard from the

grass-grown ledges, where amongst the tufts of sea-pink they form their artless nests. This, and not, as one might suppose, the Common Gull of the bird books, is the one which breeds so generally upon the rugged parts of our coast. The Common Gull, so called, abundant through the winter, now leaves for the north, and nowhere breeds south of the Border. So easily may a trivial name lend itself to error. The gulls are in fact a puzzling family to the beginner, the speckled and spotted dress of the young birds giving place gradually to the adult plumage, which is sometimes not acquired till the third or fourth year. There is, further, the complication of a change from summer to winter plumage. But for the study of these minor differences some time of year must be chosen when the calls in other directions are less pressing than they are in these full-tide days of April.

THE SUMMER MIGRANTS.

Little more than a hundred years ago the annual disappearance of our more delicate songsters was so little understood as to be largely shrouded in mystery. Dr. Johnson boldly stated that swallows on the approach of winter, flying above a lake or pond, "conglobulate" into a ball and sink below the surface of the water, remaining quiescent in the mud

until the return of spring. White, of Selborne, wavered, at one time inclining to the opinion that the swallows crossed the sea, at other times half expecting to hear of their being discovered in mid-winter in a somnolent condition in holes of sand-pits or under the roofs of houses. This uncertainty has, of course, long since vanished. A host of observers chronicles the re-appearance of the welcome heralds of spring, so that, in addition to knowing when and upon what part of the coast they land, we may trace, step by step, their gradual dispersal over the country. Especially good work has been done by the lighthouse-keepers, some of whom have become keen observers. Captains of ships, too, take note of the feathered wayfarers which accompany their vessels at migration time, often perching exhausted upon the deck or rigging.

The whole period of migration, from the appearance of the Wheatear and Chiffchaff to that of such late-comers as the Nightjar and Red-backed Shrike, is about seven weeks. Each arrival goes hand in hand with the attainment of a certain stage in the development of leaf and herbage, with accompanying awakening of fresh insect life. The particular date for the appearance of the Wood Wren is marked by the leafing of the beeches. The aquatic warblers do not appear until the new growth of reeds affords them sufficient cover. And the Nightjar need not be expected until,

with milder evenings, abundance of moths are flying at dusk. Of course mistakes are made, for how shall either bird or man forecast the vagaries of the English climate? The Swallows had appeared as usual in April, 1908, when the 24th of the month brought a snow-fall of nearly three inches. They vanished completely, and only returned when conditions once more approached the normal. The list of our British birds is swollen by the inclusion of a large number of species of purely accidental occurrence. Some of these waifs and strays have apparently, when migrating, got completely at sea as to direction, though no doubt in other cases they have been carried out of their course by contrary winds or sudden storms. The migrants usually travel by night, and perilous must be the passage in the gusty darkness of early April, till they see the fiery eye of Beachy Head or St. Catherine's flash-light leap out of the sea, and alight in the chilly dawn on English shores, to seek shelter in the nearest thickets at the back of the dunes. Perhaps the perils of the passage may account for the fact that the numbers of some species, as of the Chiffchaff and Lesser Whitethroat, vary greatly from year to year.

In distributing themselves over the country, the migrants follow well-defined routes. Their main arteries are usually the river valleys, such as that of the Severn, and almost all have an objection to traversing

bleak ranges of hills, as shown by the fact that those which land in South Devon diverge to either side to avoid having to cross Dartmoor. It may seem that inherited instinct has done enough in guiding the migrants back to English shores, but she has still a more wonderful task, that of enabling each bird to find its way to its native district, in many cases to the very spot where it was reared or which it frequented the previous year. This seems to the writer the real and inner mystery of migration. That birds are not guided merely by the experience of their elders is conclusively proved by the case of the cuckoo, where the young birds of the year remain with us long after the adult cuckoos have left.

Who that sees the Swallows at the moment of arrival make straight for the shed where they nested last year, or the House Martin fly direct to the eaves, can doubt that they are the identical birds whose departure he watched in the autumn? A pair of Wood Wrens nested year after year within a yard of the same spot. Over hundreds of leagues of land and sea the memory of that shady bank deep in blue-bells drew them with the magnetic influence of home. Birds of the previous year making for the spot where they were reared and finding this occupied, or being perhaps driven off by their elders, seek homes of their own. This tends to a general dispersal, and, where the species is increasing in numbers, to an extension of range into

fresh localities. The fact that some species, such as the Corncrake, appear to be dying out in certain districts is evidence that there is not a general re-distribution over the country each year. In general, as is easily seen in the case of the Wheatear and Yellow Wagtail, the males arrive first, as if to take possession of the old home or seek a new one before they are followed a few days later by their mates. If we compare the migration, say of the Willow Wren, to a wave breaking on our shores, its crest will represent the main arrival, while a series of succeeding ripples will stand for the smaller parties which continue to come in for several days. When the wave is an unusually strong one, it seems to carry individuals beyond the ordinary range of the species. Thus it is only in certain seasons that the Lesser Whitethroat reaches Western Wales. The laggards, constituting the final ripples of the wave, are probably birds which are going much further north to nest. Thus long after our resident Wheatears have settled down to breed, in fact all through April and May, other wheatears may be seen on passage. These we imagine to be on their way to Iceland or Greenland, where the climate renders it impossible for them to nest until a comparatively late date.

In an ordinary April we may expect to note some twenty arrivals, the bulk of them naturally falling within the last ten days of the month. It is the

second week which as a rule brings the first Swallow, skimming past on light and graceful wing and looking all steel-blue in the April sunshine, which has filled the meads with marsh-marigolds and brought a crowd of bees to the wallflowers. The flight of the swallow is so entirely different from that of any of our resident birds that with the merest glimpse one recognises the new-comer. For some days previously the Sand Martin, shorter-winged and mouse-coloured, has been hawking gnats over the surface of lake and river. With the Swallow comes the Willow Wren. Its soft, liquid, musical chime is heard from the orchard, when the grass begins to grow long and sends up the first flower-spikes or bennets. Now, too, in the meadows, running about amongst the grazing cattle, is seen the Yellow Wagtail, not to be confused with the so-called Grey Wagtail which has haunted brooks and stream-sides through the winter, though the latter, unfortunately for clearness of nomenclature, also show a good deal of yellow. But there is no mistaking the rich canary-yellow breast of the new arrival.

By the middle of the month the Nightingale should be heard in its favourite haunts, not as yet in concert form, but merely, as it were, running over the opening bars. All the warblers, if the weather is cold when they arrive, remain silent and are little seen. It is noticeable that each pair of nightingales keeps throughout

the season to the coppice or bushy thicket by the roadside which it selects on arrival. The first Redstart shows as a flash of colour as he goes along the hedge, pausing to sing and vibrate his ruddy tail, while a newly-arrived Tree Pipit is making his restless little ascents and descents, trilling out a song which would be little noticed but for the louder, penetrating notes with which it ends. These, as we have often observed when travelling, are clearly audible above the noise of a train in motion. The Blackcap from the leafing oaks adds a voice of first-rate quality and compass to the spring choir. Many consider that no rival songster reaches the level of his rich, mellow strain. A walk along the brook-side will now show that the Common Sandpiper is back in his summer haunts, trilling out his love-song and playing about over the surface of the quiet pools with all the quick turns of the swallow tribe.

In the third week of the month often comes a change from the harsh, dry winds which have prevailed for so long. At evening the birds sing with fresh vigour for they feel the rain coming. After a night of warm showers the morning shows that the hedgerows have rushed into leaf and that the chestnut leaves begin " to spread into the perfect fan." The change is accompanied by a rush of migrants ; five or six new-comers may be noted in the course of the day. Now, spring personified, comes the call of the

first Cuckoo. The white-rumped House Martin, always later to arrive than the swallow, twitters once more about its nest under the eaves. The Wood Wren is whispering in the tops of the beeches, and a half-smothered babbling from the tangle of briars and brambles tells where the Whitethroat is soliloquizing *sotto voce* over his home-coming. Meanwhile, from the thicket by the stream-side the Sedge Warbler chatters and scolds, and the persistent note of the Grasshopper Warbler rings on the ear, one of our strangest bird voices, like the stridulation of cricket or cicada in its monotony, or resembling rather the noise made by the angler's reel as it spins round when he makes a cast. Unless we live in western or northern England, in some land of hill and dale, we shall scarcely be likely to see the Pied Flycatcher, and this is unfortunate, for, with its pleasing habits and song and boldly-contrasted livery of black and white, there is no more charming bird upon our list.

April will be almost giving place to May when some still night we hear from the hay-meadow the Corncrake's strident discord, welcome at first, later to become exasperating in its rasping monotony, more especially if the performer has located himself under our window. There are other migrants yet to follow, but for these we must await the warmer sun and leafier woods of May.

CALENDAR FOR APRIL

April 1st.—Ring Ouzel arrives.
,, 3rd.—Blackbird and Ring Dove nest.
,, 6th.—Sand Martin arrives.
,, 9th.—Stonechat and Moorhen nest.
,, 10th.—House Sparrow nests.
,, 12th.—Long-tailed Tit, Magpie, and Common Snipe nest.
,, 13th.—Swallow, Willow Wren and Yellow Wagtail arrive.
Brambling last seen.
,, 14th.—Carrion Crow and Common Buzzard nest.
Young Rooks heard in the nests.
Hooded Crow last seen.
,, 15th.—Black-headed Gull nests.
,, 16th.—Nightingale arrives.
,, 17th.—Meadow Pipit and Red Grouse nest.
,, 18th.—Pheasant nests.
Tree Pipit and Redstart arrive.
,, 19th.—Chaffinch nests.
,, 20th.—Goldcrest nests.
,, 22nd.—Ringed Plover nests.
Common Sandpiper arrives.
,, 23rd.—Linnet, Yellow-hammer, Skylark, Starling Jackdaw and Curlew nest.
Blackcap arrives.
,, 24th.—Kingfisher nests.
,, 25th.—Greenfinch, Pied Wagtail and Kestrel nest.
Whinchat, Common Whitethroat, Grasshopper Warbler, House Martin and Cuckoo arrive.

April 26th.—Wren nests.

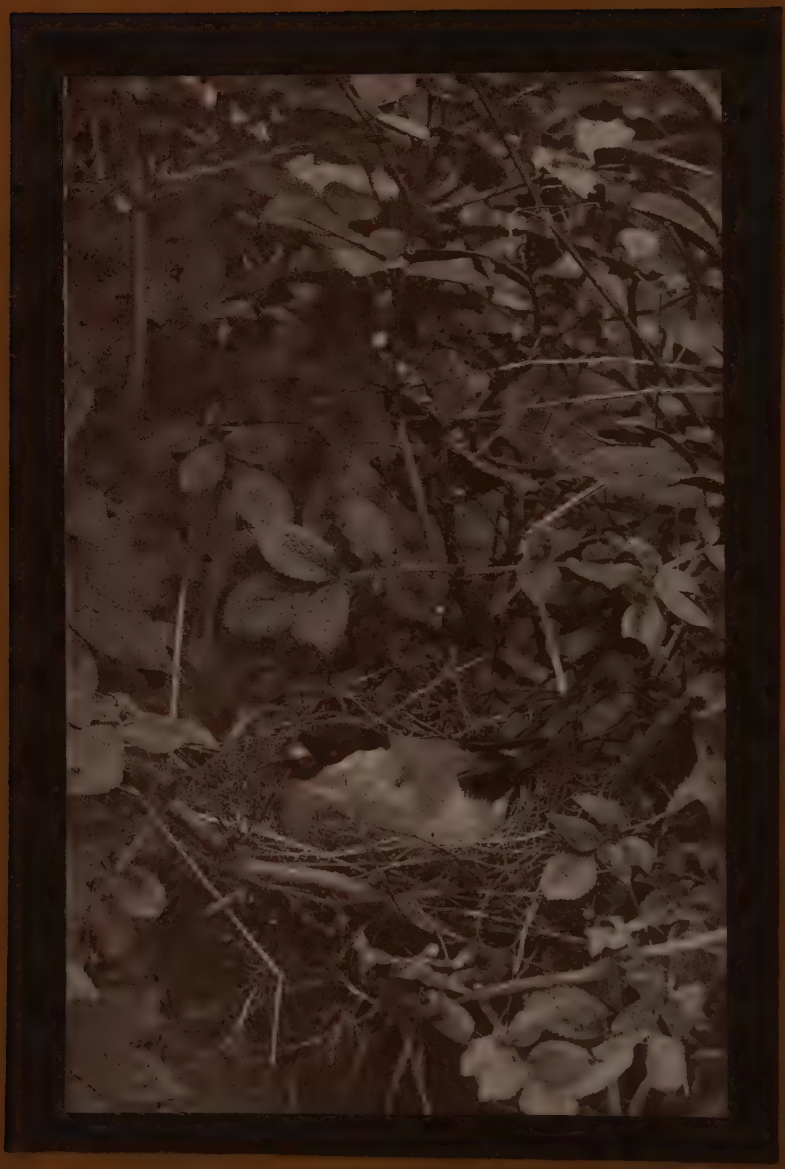
,, 27th.—Coot nests.
Wood Wren arrives.

,, 28th.—The Tits, Great, Blue, Coal and Marsh, nest.
Teal nests.
Young Song Thrushes of first brood leave the nest.

,, 29th.—Lesser Whitethroat arrives.

,, 30th.—Wheatear nests.
Pied Flycatcher, Sedge Warbler and Corncrake arrive.

Bird Life in May



BULLFINCH ON NEST.

Photo—W. Bickerton.

Bird Life in May

After the April days, crowded as they were with incident, what shall we say of May? Now indeed spring is in its hey-dey and life is at the full. The air is still fresh and cool, filled with the scents of opening leafage. What is there in the very air of a May morning which makes all things young again?—some property which is lost all too soon as "the merrie month" gives place to mid-summer. At no time of year is a larger variety of birds with us, for, while the later comers amongst the summer migrants are making their appearance, many waders and wild-fowl still linger on shore and estuary before taking their long flight to the north. All birds which breed with us are now nesting; almost all are in full plumage and in best voice. Those which nested early are now busy with a second venture, almost before the first family is off their hands. There are of course exceptions; the members of the crow tribe rear but a single brood, and the same is certainly the case with many pairs of tits. The primary reason why nests seem so much more numerous in hedge and thicket than they did last month is that the summer migrants

are now breeding. But some of our resident birds, and those of the hardiest, are far from being in a hurry to take up parental duties. We have never seen the eggs of the Bullfinch before May is in, and rarely those of the Yellow-hammer with their inky scrawls, while the Common Bunting goes so far as to postpone nesting until the latter half of the month.

The first half of May sees the list of our summer migrants completed by the addition of some half-a-dozen late comers. The month is scarcely in when with shrill screaming, the long-winged Swifts dash once more round the steeples, abbey-walls or battlements of the ruined castle in which they nest. From the copse, now deep in grasses from amongst which the white-flowering hemlocks grow tall and lush, come the song of the Garden Warbler and the purring " coo " of Turtle Doves. One needs a nice ear for the minor differences of bird song to discriminate at once and with certainty between the songs of the garden warbler and the blackcap, but, while the rich warble of the latter is delivered in separate phrases, that of the garden-warbler runs on like a rill, not so loud but more continuously. Yet, knowing this much, we may sometimes listen in doubt. For a bird's song is the expression of his varying mood. The blackcap, as he sings amongst the tender greenery of the young oaks, is all animation. As we watch his erected crest and the movements of his swelling throat, we may perhaps

catch a glimpse of the neat red-capped hen for whom his minstrelsy is tuned. This is the typical song, but at other times he improvises, singing quietly to himself in a strain so different that we may fail to recognize its authorship. Many other birds interweave at times unfamiliar variations into their songs. The stonechat and whinchat may be quoted as examples.

The next arrival is more likely to be identified by its movements than by its voice. The Spotted Flycatcher is said to have a song, but it is so faint and low that few can claim to have heard it. However, the flycatcher's rapid dash after an insect and return to its perch are so characteristic that an added voice would be superfluous. Various other birds, even the starling, sparrow and chaffinch, attempt this manœuvre on calm days when insects are flying high, but the flycatcher is the only one which performs it gracefully and with certainty.

If, when the hawthorns are white, we chance to catch a glimpse of a very shy bird which, as it goes down the hedge-side, looks something like a large edition of the redstart, we may know the Red-backed Shrike or Butcher Bird, and may look for the nearest blackthorn bush with the expectation of finding a number of insect victims impaled upon its spines.

On the first warm evening after the month has half run its course, the Nightjar may be looked for, as it skims in the gloaming with noiseless flight round the

trees on the edge of the heath, alighting sometimes on a branch where it sits lengthways, producing the strange churring noise which has earned for it in some places the name of "spinning wheel," and which may be compared to the distant sound of a lawn-mower. With this mysterious bird of the twilight ends our list of the regular summer migrants, or those which may be looked for with certainty. That dashing little falcon, the long-winged Hobby, comes to nest in a few favoured woodlands, arriving in the latter half of the month. Sometimes, but not every year, we hear the liquid three-fold whistle of the Quail, coming from a field of springing corn. Probably a May never passes in which a few Hoopoes do not land upon our shores to strut and bow and spread their fan-like crests, while a brightly-plumaged Oriole flashes, all gold and black, from tree to tree. But such visitors are too conspicuous to allow of their remaining unmolested. If permitted to breed, they would no doubt return with their progeny in increasing numbers from year to year. It is noticeable that the migrants which are latest to appear, such as the flycatcher and shrike, begin to nest within a few days of their arrival, while the earlier ones proceed in a much more leisurely manner A feature of the month is the reappearance of some of these bird associations which are merely broken up for the nesting-season. For the Long-tailed Tits, as soon as they have left the nest, begin

NEST OF CHAFFINCH.
Photo—J. T. Newman.

to range the woods in family parties, and the Rooks, with such juveniles as have escaped the baptism of fire which greeted their first fluttering appearance as "branchers," again betake themselves to meadow and corn-field.

Turn where we will this May morning, when the woods are all one blue sheen of wild hyacinths, there is something of interest to note. The air is cleared and freshened by the showers of the night and every bird-throat is thrilling with song. Willow Wrens answer each other in a ceaseless chime. See the Whitethroat as he bustles and fusses into and out of the hedge, then throws himself into the air to sing. Next, with a beak full of dry bents he disappears, just where the nettles are growing up thickly through the lower part of the bramble bush. Anon he dances off to a hedgerow tree, singing as he flies, a restless sprite with all the pleasing fever of spring-time in his blood. His flimsy nursery, when finished, is so slight and frail that the eggs can almost be seen through it. What varying grades of craftmanship are exemplified by the nests which one may meet with in a May morning! At the foot of the scale is the scanty handful of twigs upon which the ring-dove broods, more pigeon than nest. A decided advance is shown by the platform of sticks which the sparrow-hawk builds upon the side branch half way up the stem of the larch. While the exquisitely neat nest of the chaffinch exemplifies what

may be done by artful blending of moss, wool and lichens, that of the bullfinch shows what a high level may be attained by the use of such unpromising material as fine twigs and slender roots. The willow wren and chiffchaff build the dome-shaped structures which have led country boys to name them "oven birds," with the advantage that a roof shelters the feather-bed upon which repose their fragile pink eggs. Then what various tastes are shown in choice of site. The flycatcher builds on the horizontal branch of the pear-tree trained along the garden wall, the nightingale in the drift of dead oak-leaves at the foot of the honeysuckle, while the tree-creeper has found that there is just room to squeeze in its nest between the old ivy-stem and the tree-trunk to which it clings. The great-tit has a weakness for disused pumps and country letter-boxes; the marsh-tit excavates in the touch-wood of the willow stump, while the blue-tit, sitting deep in the hollow gate-post, when investigated, hisses in a series of explosive puffs, but refuses to budge.

But for variety of small birds commend us to some quiet nook in the West Midlands where, by grassy, lane, past hop-yard and bluebell copse, one reaches some sequestered orchard of old fruit-trees, their gnarled limbs green with moss or grey with lichen, and abounding in those holes so dear to many birds when on nesting bent. A nightingale hops out from the hedge,

robin-like, to seize a worm. Goldfinches sing amongst the falling apple-blossom, which begins to cover the grass under the trees with a carpet rose-tinted and white. The shy hawfinch, too, is extremely partial to these orchards. At first it appears as if every hole held its brood of hungry, clamorous starlings. The old birds are constantly arriving with food, chattering and squalling. The green-woodpecker has no sooner hewn out his burrow in the old pear-tree than he is promptly evicted by these pushing and unscrupulous neighbours. The wiser nuthatches have plastered up the entrance to their tenement with clay, which sets as hard as a brick, leaving a way of ingress just sufficient for themselves, but impossible for any bird of larger bulk. But there are holes which are not roomy enough for the starling. These are prime favourites with the redstart, the tree-sparrow and the various tits. Here, too, the Wryneck, with its delicately pencilled plumage of brown and grey and black which harmonises so well with the colour of the bark, skulks out of sight behind the branch up which it is climbing,—a mysterious bird, so little seen that only its loud monotonous cry of " pay, pay, pay," tells how numerous it really is in the orchard country. By lucky chance one may surprise it at an ant-hill, where its long sticky tongue takes up the startled emmets in crowds. If taken unawares in its nest-hole, it hisses and squirms in such a way that its

country name of "snake-bird" requires no further elucidation.

Or, in place of the orchards, let us visit the heath where the gorse is now in its glory. Linnets, crimson-breasted cocks and plainer hens, twitter and sing amongst the golden blossom. Stonechats scold from their points of vantage on the topmost spikes. The Whinchat, always to be distinguished from the last by his buff breast and white eye-streak, is here also, but is equally at home in the hay meadows. Amongst the bare mounds of the warren the Wheatear flicks his white tail and dives into a deserted burrow, in some dark recess of which is his nest with the pale blue eggs. The wild outcry of the Lapwings is explained as we find their newly-hatched young crouching close to the ground. The frenzied "peewit" of the old bird is doubtless an exhortation to "lie low." Is it by accident that this youngster has squatted upon a lichen-covered stone which its mottled down exactly matches in colour? Meanwhile a Meadow Pipit is taking its short butterfly ascents, making the most by its industry of its feeble tinkle of a song. It sings both in ascending and descending, while the Tree Pipit rises silently from the bough of a hedge-row tree, reaches his highest point, and begins to sing only as he turns to come down, broad-arrow fashion, to his perch again. One has only to walk at random and a titlark (to give the meadow-pipit its familiar country name)

is sure, before long, to start out from almost under one's feet, from a snugly hidden nest with its dark-coloured eggs. These are always of the same type, while those of the tree-pipit vary immensely, red, lilac or blotched like a reed-bunting's.

All the pipits have a pretty habit of chasing and playing, toying and kissing on the wing. How fond too, the Cuckoo is of heaths and rough hill-sides. These abound in the insect food, such as hairy caterpillars, which cuckoos prefer, and offer a large selection of nests in which a cuckoo's egg, placed there "unbeknown," may be palmed off upon the unsuspecting proprietors. Is the imposture not sometimes detected, however? Certain it is that the cuckoo is always attended by small birds, which often appear to be mobbing it with indignant outcry. Country people will tell us that they take it for a hawk. Each cuckoo has his own domain, and great is the chasing and voluble the cuckooing when a rival intrudes upon it. "In June he changes his tune," as the saw has it, but as a matter of fact by the middle of May many are already shouting their stammering "cuck-cuckoo!"

The observer of shore birds is never more busy than in early May. As soon as the month comes in, we hear once more the clear, rippling call-note of the Whimbrel. The various plovers and sandpipers which paddle about the sand-banks and muddy estuaries, more especially of the East Coast, are now

reinforced by the arrival of others of their kin which have wintered further south, such as the Curlew-Sandpiper, Turnstone and Godwit. Some of these, together with the Grey Plover and Knot, may be met with, during their short stay, in full breeding plumage. The Stork, Spoonbill and Avocet stray across from Holland to the tidal flats of East Anglia, and, thanks to protection, have more chance than formerly of escaping with their lives. The Black-throated and Red-throated Divers sometimes remain until they have assumed the full livery of the breeding season. Now, also, the Terns or Sea Swallows are seen once more, making quick headway with springy beats of their wings, or neatly poising themselves and plunging along the tide-edge. Small parties or "trips" of Dotterel halt for a day or two upon the chalk-downs on their way to their nesting haunts upon the mountains of the Lake District or of Scotland.

MAY ON THE MOORS.

It is late before spring brings any change to the dark monotony of the heather-clad moors. Frequent enough are chilly, sullen days when "winter lingers in the lap of May," and when, in the middle of the month, there is scarcely a leaf to be seen on the oak-copse which fringes the slope below the moor's edge. But the moorland birds come of a hardy stock. The

Lapwings often sit while the grass around them is white with frost in the early mornings. The Grouse cocks crow on all sides in the chilly dawns of early April, and by the end of the month their mates are brooding their richly-coloured eggs under shelter of the bilberry and heather. By the same date the Curlew has deposited her four pear-shaped eggs in a saucer-shaped hollow of the damp soil near the spring head, which is marked by yellow tufts of sedge and soaking sponge-like cushions of the red and white bog mosses. No moorland sound is so reminiscent of spring as the long, rippling call-note of the curlew, commenced as he takes wing, and dying away in a regularly descending scale as he settles again after his flight. How boldly, too, he drives off the carrion-crow, mounting above him to get a good swoop, while the crow swerves in clumsy attempt to avoid the onset. To the crow's account must be laid those broken egg-shells of creamy white and flecks of scattered down where the Teals' nest was snugly hidden in the deep heather. But some nests escape, for later, upon the margin of one of the lonely pools in the hills where the sandpiper whistles upon the pebbly shore, we come upon a family party, the mother teal shamming wounded in a desperate attempt to cover the retreat of eight tiny ducklings as they bravely breast the wavelets in her wake. The soft rushy bogs surrounding these pools are the nesting haunts of the Dunlin, which run

tamely before us or wade knee-deep in the shallows, while amongst the tufts of sedge, under shelter of the bog myrtles, is a Snipes' nest, containing newly-hatched young in their rich variegated down, amongst which dull red predominates.

But forward again, over heather-grown slopes, now broken by a few rocky ledges where the growth is taller, having escaped burning when the moor was fired in order that the tender shoots of the ling, as it begins to grow again, may afford food for the grouse. Here we may expect to find the Merlin, and sure enough, with sharp ringing note our gallant little falcon cleaves the air, in outline not unlike a large swift. In a hollow, deep down among the heather, are the four red eggs, smaller and more finely marked than those of the kestrel, in the slightest of nests—a mere handful of moss and dried grass. Much persecuted by the game-watcher for reputed depredations amongst the young grouse is the blue-backed merlin, though, judging from its castings, its usual prey appears to be the meadow-pipit, with an occasional wheatear or ring-ouzel. No doubt also the twite, the "yellow-billed lintie" of the Scotch moors, furnishes it with many a meal.

The merlin's noble relative, the Peregrine Falcon, naturally meets with scant shrift, and is now banished from the neighbourhood of most grouse-moors, though a number of eyries remain upon the coast, usually upon

PEREGRINE FALCON FEEDING YOUNG.
From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

cliffs tenanted by a multitude of sea-fowl. Still it would not be difficult to find a bold escarpment from which, as one nears it, the fierce falcon dashes out, with clamorous outcry, from the overhung ledge where, in the dry earth she has scraped out a hollow amongst the grass tufts for her big red eggs. She sweeps round in great circles, cleaving the air with swift, clean strokes, then settles on a rocky pinnacle, where the glass shows her black moustaches and the wavy lines on her breast. Meanwhile, her mate, the tiercel, smaller and with shriller cry, is on the wing, tilting at the ravens which have a nest further along the same line of cliffs. Sometimes it comes to actual blows and the black feathers have been seen to fly freely. Happily a sentiment is spreading in favour of such picturesque bandits as the falcon, a feeling that they are beautiful in themselves and that their presence adds interest to their wild and desolate haunts. Thanks to the grace thus afforded, we may still in a few localities, watch the fork-tailed Kite circling high in the air above remote Welsh woodlands, as it did some centuries since above the metropolis, when it was the scavenger of London streets. The same sentiment has come to the rescue of the Golden Eagle, which, once nearly extinct in Scotland, is again fairly numerous in the Highlands.

But our list of moorland birds is far from complete. The Ring Ouzel shows his white gorget where blocks

of millstone-grit stand out from their setting of bilberry and heather, or, perched on the old wheel of the deserted lead-mine, pipes monotonously between the drizzling showers. Higher still is the summit of the moor, a dreary desolation of peat-bog, scantily covered with coarse grass and rushes, amongst which the white heads of the cotton-grass wave, and worn into a thousand bare, black furrows by the action of storm and rain. Here grows the crowberry, whose small black berries furnish the grouse with a favourite food. Here, too, is the home of the Golden Plover, now showing the black under-parts characteristic of its breeding plumage. Its low, piping call is deceptive, often causing us to look far afield while the bird is standing upon a tump amongst the bog mosses close at hand. The golden-plover seems to have caught the very spirit of the moors, so well does its cry harmonize with the dreary desolation of the scene, where no other sound is heard but the startled sniff of the active hill-sheep bounding off at our approach.

Here, welling up amongst the mosses, the sundews and bog-asphodel, the streamlets take their rise. Let us follow one of them in its downward course as it cuts deeply into the flank of the moor. It falls from pool to pool, trout-haunted, at times almost hidden from sight by the deep fringe of heather or the uncurling fronds of sweet-scented fern, then between rocks where the fresh green bilberry shrubs with their

waxen blossoms and the wood sorrel, with its delicately-veined flowers, clothe every ledge. The white-breasted Dipper will fly before us with sharp "zit, zit," or stand on a stone bowing to its reflection in the water, while sprightly Grey Wagtails, surely the most graceful of a graceful family, and full of life as the waters of the infant river, fly from stone to stone amongst the eddies and spray at the foot of the fall. The male has the full black throat and the special call-note "twee, twee" of the breeding season. Birch and rowan (how preferable is the old North Country name to "mountain ash") now begin to clothe the sides of the little dale, furnishing nesting holes to many a pair of Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers. Many a May morning here sees a keen white frost and, when such an one falls late in the month, we have seen the opening fern-fronds and the young shoots of ash and oak hang black and dead. A Raven passes with hoarse croak, and from far up in the blue comes the wild mewing cry of a soaring Buzzard. Its mate sweeps out from the ivied crag to join it. Stunted trees cling to the face of the cliff and, supported by one of these, is the nest, nearly a yard across, built of smaller sticks than that of the raven, lined with tufts of moor-grass torn up by the roots and garnished round the edge of the cup with fresh leafy twigs of birch. As we climb to it, the cries of the birds become more angry than plaintive, and their lazy floating is exchanged

for a rapid flight as they swerve and circle, at times mounting to a great height. If late in the month, the two or three large roundish eggs, slightly clouded and zoned with red, have probably given place to young birds in greyish down. Fierce as young eaglets, they will strike at the hand of the intruder, in fact, the first hatched, and consequently the strongest of the brood, not infrequently pecks and worries his nest fellows to death. Round the edge of the nest is strewn the provision for this hopeful family, a field-mouse, the remains of a mole and portions of a dead lamb. The harmlessness of the buzzard is now so generally recognised that most landowners have given their gamekeepers orders not to molest it, and to all appearance its presence may long add an item of beauty and interest to the rocky dales of the north and west.

CALENDAR FOR MAY.

May 1st.—Golden Plover nests.
Whimbrel arrives.

,, 2nd.—Reed Bunting nests.
Common Gull last seen.
Swift arrives.

,, 3rd.—Mistle Thrush nests for the second time.

,, 4th.—Tree Creeper nests.
Young Ravens leave the nest.
Garden Warbler arrives.

,, 5th.—Fieldfare last seen.
Turtle Dove arrives.

NEST OF GRASSHOPPER WARBLER.
Photo—J. T. Newman.

May 6th.—Bullfinch and Sparrow-hawk nest.
,, 7th.—Young Rooks leave the nest.
,, 8th.—Chiffchaff and Common Partridge nest.
Song Thrush nests for the second time.
Spotted Flycatcher arrives.
,, 9th.—Lesser Redpoll nests.
,, 10th.—Nightingale nests.
,, 11th.—Tree Pipit nests.
,, 12th.—Little Tern arrives.
,, 13th.—Sand Martin and Oyster-catcher nest.
,, 14th.—Redstart, Willow Wren and Common Sandpiper nest.
Red-backed Shrike arrives.
,, 15th.—Common Tern arrives.
,, 16th.—Whinchat nests.
,, 17th.—Common Whitethroat nests.
,, 18th.—Nightjar arrives.
,, 19th.—Blackcap nests.
,, 20th.—Swallow nests.
,, 21st.—Wood Wren nests.
,, 23rd.—Garden Warbler nests.
,, 24th.—Sedge Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher nest.
,, 25th.—Puffin nests.
,, 26th.—Grasshopper Warbler nests.
,, 28th.—Red-backed Shrike nests.
,, 30th.—Swift nests.

Bird Life in June

Bird Life in June

WHILE in early April we had all the promise of spring before us, early June carries that season to its completed perfection and rounded fulness. When, as sometimes, though, alas, not always, happens, its third week brings those "perfect days in June," when the garden is full of roses and when the first strawberries ripen, we feel that the coming months can have nothing quite so fair to offer. For all too soon the longest day is reached; the flowery wealth of the hay-meadows falls before the scythe; there is the blaze of charlock and the flaunting scarlet of poppies amongst the corn, and one feels that summer is here. Towards the close of the month many birds become silent; we hear only solitary voices in place of the full chorus of its opening days, and this is especially the case if the weather is hot and dry. In no other month are our birds so stationary as in June; migration is at a standstill; there are neither goers nor comers.

June may be characterised as the month of young birds. Innumerable broods of fledglings are launched upon the world to swell the bird population of copse and hedge and thicket, their parents being frequently

distracted between the claims of a first family and their preparations for quickly following it with a second. At no time of year do birds work harder. Watch the Wren popping into its nest every three or four minutes all through the long day, with a beakful of caterpillars to feed its nearly fledged young, and think of the labour which goes to the gathering of such small and nimble provender. Or note the assiduous and unwearied foraging of parental Tits, just before the emergence of their young from all sorts of unsuspected holes and crevices at the beginning of the month. About the same date, an unusual commotion tells that the young Starlings have left the nest. Crowds of them come trooping over the meadows, now glowing with buttercups or reddening with sorrel. For the time being, their noisy squalling drowns all quieter bird notes.

Meanwhile the Hedge Sparrows have their hands full in catering for a young cuckoo, which already fills the nest and by further growth will expand it quite out of shape. One may still find a Robins' nest with eggs, surely an attempt at a third brood. Very late nests of the Blackbird and Thrush can, no doubt, be similarly explained. It is doubtful if the House Sparrow always draws the line even at three families, but here—sole opportunity—we may say a word in its favour, for it feeds its young with insect food and largely with small green caterpillars. The

Willow Wrens, which yesterday were peering out of their domed nest on the ground amongst the springing bracken, are now being fed by the old birds in the hedge, which, with its feet deep in foxgloves and campion, already shows the pink blush of a rose here and there. The young birds more yellow in colour, than their parents, keep up a low plaintive chirp, perhaps to hold the party together. How marvellously rapid is the growth and development of nestlings such as these, in accordance with the amount of food, vast in proportion to their size, which they consume. Young Blackcaps or Garden Warblers, if alarmed, will scramble out of the nest long before they are able to fly. In all these small birds the feet and claws show a precociously strong development. They are thus able to perch at an early age, and to cling to their perches tenaciously, remaining quiescent for a time, and then, as a rule, giving a sudden and loud call for food. However well hidden by the leaves or undergrowth, their parents find them easily by means of this call.

At no other time of year is one so puzzled by the multiplicity of unfamiliar bird-notes. Many of these are the calls of young birds to their parents, but it has always appeared to the writer as if the old birds used a sort of endearing "baby talk," especially when encouraging their young to leave the nest or to attempt a first flight. Certain it is that one hears

all kinds of confidential twitterings which are discarded as soon as the fledglings can shift for themselves. This family life which seems to show birds at their best, involving, as it does, so much care and watchfulness on behalf of their young, is only a fleeting phase, for the family is soon merged in the flock, but while it lasts it gives us many a pleasing picture, *e.g.*, of a whole family of tits in fluffy and engaging infancy perched side by side upon a branch, or of the cock chaffinch, spick and span, hopping up to place a grub in the wide-open mouth of one of his hopeful fledglings whose quivering wings and impatient cries tell of its eager expectancy, or again of the flycatcher, which in an aerial excursion has just made a prize of a "long-legs" with an audible snap of his bill, carrying his booty to the young bird, more mealy in plumage than himself, perched on a croquet-hoop or on the edge of the tennis-net. What a twittering and trilling and scolding there is where the education of young linnets is proceeding amongst the gorse, while in the hay meadows whinchats, perched on the taller heads of cow-parsnip, with slowly dipping tails and sharp note of "u-tick" warn their young to keep down amongst the long grasses. What prettier sight than to see the swallow poise on fluttering pinions for a moment to feed a young bird on the wing, or hover to fill each gaping bill of its young family perched side by side on the telegraph-wire.

LINNET'S NEST IN ROSE BUSH.
Painted by GEORGE SOPER.

The first or nestling plumage of young birds is of special interest, as in many cases it very soon undergoes modification. It is evident that fledglings in general resemble the female bird, but in young males, as of the chaffinch and bullfinch, the distinguishing features of the plumage of the cock bird soon become apparent. The nestling dress is perhaps a reminiscence of ancestral plumage before specific distinctions had become so marked as at present, *e.g.*, the spotted breast of young blackbirds indicate a near relationship to the thrush, and if the spotted dress of young robins leads us to include the redbreast in the same family, we shall not be far astray.

But it is not only the small perching birds which the long June days finds busy with nursery duties. Upon her platform of sticks the Sparrow Hawk is dividing a neatly plucked blackbird amongst her young, whose dress of spotless down lends them an air of innocence but little in keeping with their true character. The young Kestrels in the hole in the old quarry, when inspected, shrink as far back as they can, then stand and face us with defiant eyes and wide-open menacing beaks, their claws clutching nervously.

About the middle of the month the Partridge leads her young, dainty as bantam chicks, to the old weedy pasture, unmown for years, there to scratch amongst the ant-hills to lay bare the succulent "eggs" of which

they are so fond. If surprised, the whole family squats and often escapes observation, but, if detected, the old birds tumble before us with trailing wings while the young run "cheeping" to hide. Much the same thing occurs if we happen to stumble across a brood of newly-hatched Grouse chicks on the moor. As the old bird flaps and scuffles on the ground, the young, one and all, become perfectly motionless, and seem to vanish before our eyes, so perfect is their harmony of tint with that of moss and lichen and heather. The Curlew, whose loud "trōō-ey, trōō-ey" betrays a world of anxiety for the safety of young crouching close in the sedge amongst the bog mosses, sometimes resorts to the same device as the hen partridge or grouse. Picking up one of the nestlings, we note that its bill, later so long and curved, is at present quite short and straight, under an inch in length.

By the lake side we come upon a brood of young Wild Ducks and, as the half-grown "flappers" cleverly gain cover, the old bird, in a frenzy of quacking and splashing, endeavours to cause a diversion in their favour. This trick, "shamming wounded" as it is called, is also a regular part of the stock-in-trade of some of the small birds, notably of the Reed Bunting, which will tumble off the nest—lame, broken-winged, in a hopeless state—recovering in direct proportion as danger to its nest grows less. In a hole in the steep clay bank which overlooks the quiet backwater of the

river, where the young Pied Wagtails in their slaty-grey plumage run about on their rafts of floating water-buttercup, a pair of Kingfishers is rearing a brood. Their sanitary arrangements are imperfect, for filth trickling from the entrance and a strong smell of ammonia are the invariable indications of a growing family.

All the quiet water-meadows this day of blue June weather are given up to the hay and the cattle and the birds, while the warm air is laden with the scents of midsummer, of elder blossom, honeysuckle, meadow-sweet and fern. A Moorhen, swimming amongst the waving trails of white-flowered ranunculus, nods his head with every stroke, while his mate croaks from cover of the flags and water-docks close by. Presently, as we watch, she comes into view with a fleet of downy young in her wake. The Sand Martins are swarming like bees round their holes where the brook has worn for itself a steep, sandy escarpment. A mass of soaking water-weeds floats near the reedy margin of the pond. Remove the uppermost layer, laid loosely on when the owner left, and we find the eggs of the Dabchick or Little Grebe, originally white, but now deeply discoloured. Reed Warblers chatter and scold, and one may find, neatly suspended between the reed-stems, their deep purse-shaped nests. Far more difficult of discovery is the nest of the Grasshopper Warbler, deeply hidden amongst dense herbage, and

not to be found by watching its owners, which, when they visit their treasure, creep mouse-like through the thicket.

The summer migrants which were the latest to arrive are scarcely to be found nesting before the first week in June. The Turtle Dove's nest of light, wiry twigs may be found in woods and thickets. For that of the Red-backed Shrike one must search a high, overgrown hedge-row, and so shy are the butcher-birds that often the first indication of their presence is the discovery of their rather bulky nest, with the eggs always of one of two types, either ash-grey or salmon-coloured. As we search, a Cuckoo alights on the fence and calls time after time, his head held low, his tail somewhat higher and partly spread. But by the end of the month most cuckoos have become silent. The Rooks, nesting duties completely over, have deserted the rookery. The Nightingale's croak or scolding "cur-r" shows that the olive-brown eggs are hatched in the nest down amongst the dead oak-leaves. Upon the heath or in some opening of the woods one may chance upon the Nightjar, drowsily brooding with half-closed eyes upon her two beautiful eggs, and looking for all the world like a rough piece of bark. Apart from sea-fowl, the nightjar is the only one of our British birds which makes absolutely no nest.

But is not one of the chief glories of June to be found in its long lingering twilights? When the Thrushes

and Blackbirds have shouted their good-night and are silent, the Grasshopper Warbler ceases his trill from the thicket, and even the restless Sedge-bird seems to feel the stilly influence of the hour. The Swifts dart screaming round their nest-holes to serenade their mates. So late are they upon the wing that we have heard them within an hour of midnight. Few people have any idea of the amount of life which is astir during the few short hours of the midsummer night. As the white mist rises from the meadows, the Corncrake still calls with rasping monotony and apparently keeps up its vigil till dawn. The Cuckoo frequently calls all night long. Lapwings flutter moth-like overhead as one walks the downs, their shrill "peewit" having a peculiarly eerie sound in the darkness.

As the full moon rises over the spinney, the Nightingale trills and bubbles over with song. We have heard the Wheatear singing well on a moonlight night. The air vibrates with the reeling of the Nightjar, as it chases the white moths above the dewy meads or skims round the resting cattle to catch the flies which trouble them. Then there are of course the authorised night watchmen, the Owls, for whose vocal performances we are prepared, but how many voices of the night remain unidentified and mysterious. Some may perhaps be attributed to the Moorhen. Certain it is that moorhens are constantly on the

move at night, when apparently they fly from pond to pond.

One weird sound will only be heard by dwellers upon the coast. This is the voice of the Manx Shearwater, a sort of ghostly "cuck-cuckoo," and the writer has only heard it about midnight on hot, sultry nights of June. When the full moon falls in the last ten days of the month there is of course no darkness, and we are reminded of the bright summer nights of the far north. Such of our birds as do go to rest have at midsummer a scant six hours for repose. We have heard the blackbird singing at 9.30 and again at 3.5 the following morning. A robin is singing at 3.15, sparrows chirping half an hour later. By four, swallows are on the wing, wood-pigeons cooing and birds in general are awake and active.

THE LEAFY MONTH.

In a backward year plenty of ash-trees and some elms are not half in leaf by the first of June. But though "the lingering ash delays while all the woods are green," the popular fancy is right in characterising the month as that of full and perfect leafage. All the delicate winter tracery of branch and twig is now lost in those shapely masses of foliage which give charm and dignity to our English timber-trees, especially when massed in grove or copse or disposed in stately

avenues. This is the time of year, when the great trees stand girt to the feet with bluebells or rise from feathery undulations of fern, to visit those vestiges of our English forests which are scattered over the country, chiefly from the Midlands to the Channel. The majority of them are now enclosed within park wall or fence, but are none the less survivals of the old England of the smokeless skies and the merry greenwood, when

> In the boyhood of the year,
> Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere
> Rode through the coverts of the deer,

or when again, in Sherwood's glades,

> The wood-wele sange and wode not cease,
> Sittynge upon a spraye,
> So loude he wakened Robin Hood,
> On the greenswarde where he laye.

The " woodwele " is of course the Green Woodpecker. A forester born, he wears the lincoln-green, and his jocund shout rings full and mellow on the ear in every well-timbered district, whether it be amongst the great hedge-row elms of Warwickshire, the noble beeches of Buckinghamshire or the sturdy oaks which love so well the clay soil of the Weald. Such oaks, which may well have seen their prime in Shakespeare's day, still cast their shade upon the windings of the placid Avon.

Once inside the park fence, we may wander at will amongst the forest giants, gnarled, rugged and hollow, scattered about singly or in groups, knee-deep in fern. In June the fallow does with their newly-dropped fawns lie hidden amongst the fragrant bracken. The only wild fallow-deer in England are in Epping Forest; these are dark brown, almost black, in colour. Squirrels skip about on trunk and branch, their homes and fortresses. Rabbits scarcely trouble to move out of our path; the Pheasants, strolling about under the trees, watch us with a decided air of nonchalance, so well aware are both furred and feathered that the ægis of game-preserving is over them. Yet even in this sanctuary they are not entirely exempt from foes. A stoat comes slowly along the path, dragging a small rabbit, probably as heavy as itself. It scampers off, then, as we stand perfectly still, comes racing back to reconnoitre and finally succeeds in carrying off its victim. A fox, which springs out almost under our feet from a sort of lair where he has lain amongst the blue-bells, could account for the fate of more than one sitting pheasant. Yet, though a good stock of pheasants be the chief end and aim of game preserving, no less necessary is it that the covers, when drawn, should not fail to produce a fox. Here a rabbits' nest, a double handful of soft dried grass and fur, has been pulled out of the short burrow which the doe rabbit makes for her brood. Possibly a badger is the

REED WARBLER FEEDING YOUNG CUCKOO.
Photo—O. G. Pike.

culprit, though the badger, when he scents the young litter, usually digs straight down to the nest. There are badger-earths in the steep sandy bank under the roots of the pine. One may always know if they are tenanted as the badger's sanitary arrangements require that all refuse matter should be coated with earth, and thus, made up into balls, be rolled out of the burrow. The badger is known also to be a destroyer of wasps' nests which it unearths for the sake of the grubs.

These ancient woodlands, first amongst which in name and fame is the New Forest, are known to the entomologist as the haunt of many of our rarest and choicest insects. No tree fosters such a variety of insect life as the oak. Myriads of larvæ feed upon its foliage, chiefly those of the moths known as Geometers, whose caterpillars from their manner of progression are called "loopers," and the various Tortrices whose grubs roll up the leaves to form a protective case. Not infrequently we have the sorry sight of fine oaks, within a short time of their leafing, denuded of foliage until they are as bare as at Christmas. This is often the misdeed of the little *Tortrix viridis*. Some amount of recovery takes place by a later summer leafing.

Great numbers of beetles feed upon the wood and bark of the oak in every stage of their decay. The large, flesh-coloured grub of the goat-moth drives its burrows through the solid wood and ruins many a

tree in its prime. The sap which exudes from the mouths of the holes made by the goat-moth caterpillar is particularly attractive to many insects. Hornets may constantly be seen visiting the trees from which it exudes, while its fermenting sweetness acts as a bait to the stag-beetle and to many butterflies. Upon one occasion we noticed that some alders much attacked by goat-moth had drawn no less than twenty-five red-admiral butterflies to the spot. All were in perfect condition and formed a brilliant picture. Few are the localities where one may now hope to watch the buoyant flight of the purple-emperor round the tops of the tallest oaks or the graceful evolutions of the white admiral. Some of our finer English butterflies seem to be dying out in a way which cannot be altogether accounted for by the large increase in the number of those who wield the net.

Teeming as they do with insect life, it will easily be understood why oak-woods are frequented by so many birds. Compare in this respect a grove of oaks, all alive with the songs and movements of birds, with the silent and deserted pine-wood. When the hornbeam grows intermixed with the oak, as at Epping and in many of the woodlands to the north of London, we shall find the shy Hawfinch, whose big conical bill is strong enough to crush a cherry stone. Nutshells firmly placed in crevices of the bark are sure tokens of the presence of the Nuthatch, which fixes them thus that

it may hew a way to the kernel. We notice that, with each sounding blow, the nuthatch moves its whole body like a hammer swinging on a pivot, and not its head merely as the woodpecker does.

Besides the "yaffle," to give the Green Woodpecker its West Country name, the Pied Woodpecker may be seen passing with dipping flight from tree to tree. Alighting at the foot of an oak, it rapidly works its way up, climbing by a series of jerks, assisted by the support given by the stiff feathers of the tail.

Meanwhile the smaller Barred Woodpecker moves restlessly about among the tree-tops, and the little Tree Creeper, a woodpecker in miniature, creeps spirally upwards over trunk and branches. Oaks hold out another attraction to small birds, for they abound in nest-holes. These, when dry, well situated and of the right dimensions, are never untenanted,—in fact, the competition for them is keen, tenancies are short and evictions frequent. In one case, the same hole was occupied successively by nuthatches, wrynecks, starlings and two species of tit. Another, no doubt in bird view "an attractive flat with all modern conveniences," was the home in successive seasons of great-tits, starlings, robins and tree creepers.

Ancient oaks are often hollow as chimneys and are then the favourite resort of Jackdaws, which carry in quantities of sticks and drop them until they at

last find a lodgment, and so form a foundation upon which the nest may be built. Some such trees, mere shells many of them, but still making a show of youthful verdure, contain many wheel-barrow loads of sticks. The Stock Dove is always ready to take to an unoccupied hole, and certain trees are known as the ancestral patrimony of owls. The presence of a family of young Barn Owls in indicated by those snorings and snappings of the bill which have often caused a belated countryman to quicken his steps as he passes the churchyard elms. Their spotless white down is so thick about the head as to suggest a comparison with the wigs of legal luminaries. Some of these trees contain bushels of castings, the lower stratum reduced to dust or rather finely pulverised fur and bones, while the more recent ones, if examined, give an exact inventory of the owl's food,—skulls of the field-mouse and field-vole, of shrews, sparrows and an occasional bat. If its character for utility be impugned, the owl has only to adduce its castings as sufficient evidence for the defence. The Brown Owl is a bolder bird and sometimes brings young rabbits to the nest. It resents too close an inspection of its property. In one case known to the writer, a brown owl, whose two nestlings were being investigated, came noiselessly behind the intruder and gave him a blow in the back as if a cricket-ball had struck him. Formerly amongst well-grown timber it was no

TWO YOUNG BARN OWLS.

Photo—HERBERT LAZENBY.

uncommon thing to find a "raven tree," containing amongst its upper branches, a huge pile of sticks, tenanted each year by a pair of Ravens from a date beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitant. Few such now remain, but fortunately quite a number of heronries survive, many of them dating back to the days when knight and dame with hawk on wrist rode through the forest glades.

CALENDAR FOR JUNE.

June 1st.—Corncrake nests.
Young Starlings leave the nest.
,, 2nd.—Young Wheatears leave the nest.
,, 3rd.—Turtle Dove and Reed Warbler nest.
Greenfinch nests for the second time.
,, 4th.—Young Magpies leave the nest.
,, 6th.—Nightjar nests.
,, 7th.—Young Jackdaws leave the nest.
,, 10th.—Young Jays leave the nest.
,, 11th.—Young Goldfinches leave the nest.
,, 12th.—Young Willow Wrens leave the nest.
,, 15th.—Common Partridge hatches.
Young Common Whitethroats leave the nest.
,, 16th.—Nightingale ceases to sing.
,, 25th.—Cuckoos becoming silent.
,, 26th.—Young Spotted Flycatchers leave the nest.

Bird Life in July

Bird Life in July

In the bird world July is a month of transition, for, as it runs its course, the feathered life of the woods relapses into its summer quiet and comparative inactivity. When the month comes in, many birds are still breeding and the majority are still in song; when it goes out, the breeding season is practically over and almost all voices are silent. In the third week of the month there is usually a marked cessation of song. Birds are no longer bubbling over with the nervous energy which inspired the full chorus of May; their strains, few and fragmentary, are scarcely heard above the drowsy hum of the bees in the limes. Fledglings are everywhere calling for food, but, on account of the full leafiness of copse and thicket and the general similarity of nestling language, something like intuition is needed if we would credit each note to its unseen author.

Apart from their songs, the small birds, and especially the warblers, have a large variety of shorter notes, some used to call their mates or young, while another series is expressive of alarm or irritation as when watched or spied upon by prying naturalists.

To recognize them by their several scolding or alarm notes is an education apart, though many know the Nightingale's croak or harsh "cur-r" and perhaps the Blackcap's "tack, tack," a type of alarm-note shared by the chat family with most of the warblers, and also with other birds as the shrike and ring-ouzel. But for the evidence of these notes, short remarks, exclamations and objurgations, the summer birds might be supposed to have left us, while, in reality, they are still present in their usual haunts and, in fact, in far larger numbers than was the case earlier in the season. For the birds which have not brought off the last of their young broods by this date are in the minority, though early in the month a nest of eggs of blackbird, thrush, robin, or any one of the smaller birds in fact, is no rarity. These belated nests represent in some cases a normal second or third brood, in others a forlorn hope where earlier attempts have resulted in failure.

The nests of birds which breed upon the ground are specially liable to disaster. Field-mice to a certainty, and ants we strongly suspect, destroy a large number of young of such low-building species as the pipit. When containing young, they are, moreover, readily scented by keen-nosed marauders. We have known a sporting dog to "point" unfailingly nests of the titlark and stonechat. Eggs of the Lapwing are not only diligently collected but are apt to be trodden

upon by cattle, hence, while nesting began in March, young peewits but just hatched may be seen in the first week of July. The nesting season of the Heron extends over fully as long a period, for there are young still in the nests up to the middle of the month.

Some birds may be called habitual late-breeders; such are the buntings and notably the Yellow-hammer. The Wood Pigeon will sometimes go on nesting far into the autumn. Almost as late the House Sparrow sometimes rears a last brood, and it is matter of common observation that Swallows and House Martins often have young in the nest until within a few days of their time of leaving us. The Barn Owl is sometimes quite irregular in its nesting, and will rear a family at almost any time of year. One may suspect that the Wren is still breeding thus late from the energy with which it scolds at a weasel, a bright-eyed streak of reddish-brown rustling amongst the ivy-leaves on the bank. But at all seasons the wren is the watchman of the woods and never fails to spring his miniature rattle when suspicious characters are abroad. Such is the sparrow-hawk which at daybreak caught up a young pheasant from the coops to feed its young, which, having left the nest to perch near by, keep up a wailing outcry all day from the larch plantation.

Amongst thickets and on bushy hillsides we may hear the hawk-like call of the young Shrikes or

Butcher Birds, for whose benefit their parents have just spiked upon a thorn a freshly-killed nestling whitethroat. The young Woodpeckers have left the nest-hole and creep about the bole of the tree in which they were hatched.

Family parties of Goldfinches, amongst which the newly-fledged "grey pates" are conspicuous, sport amongst the ragwort and knapweed and all the gay flowered tangle of weedy field-corners. No bird has had more cause to rejoice over the depressed state of the farming industry, for uncleared fallows quickly revert to the condition of a goldfinches' paradise.

On all sides we meet with this family life, and see the education of the young birds proceeding. There is the weird outcry of Brown Owls in the plantation on moonlight nights when the rising generation is being initiated into the mysteries of mousing. Less commendable is the careful foresight of Blackbirds in leading their spotted-breasted young to the currant bushes. The Hawfinch will sometimes join in a raid on the garden, and has been known to destroy row after row of peas, biting across every pod.

As we cross the heath, a Nightjar rises before us, tumbling and fluttering, finally alighting in a cart-rut with wings outspread and quivering. This behaviour is explained as we find her two downy young, wide-mouthed as frogs, crouching close to the turf.

YOUNG NIGHTJARS—NINE DAYS OLD.

Photo—J. T. Newman.

Young Cuckoos have left the nest, and may be seen in their curious, spotted first plumage, with their foster parents in attendance. Sometimes a diminutive titlark may be seen to perch on the head of the great ugly fledgling in order to reach its mouth. Not only does the young giant keep its proper caretakers very hard at work, but it seems able to excite the benevolent interest of other small birds which chance to be in the neighbourhood. On one occasion a querulous note, as of some young bird calling for food, drew attention to a young cuckoo, which was perched on a ridge of the plough-land, with fluttering wings and great red mouth agape, while six wagtails industriously hunted the neighbouring furrows for food. From time to time one of them, tripping up to the cuckoo, deposited the insects which it had collected in his capacious jaws.

Dearly do the Wagtails love the well-kept sward of summer lawns, where the Spotted Flycatcher hawks insects all day from the edge of the tennis-net and the Nuthatch's brisk "whit, whit" is heard from the neighbouring elms, while in many such a sanctuary the shy Kingfisher visits the fountain-basin in quest of young goldfish. Who would not tide through the sunny hours of a July day in company with a hammock, the birds and a book, until at sunset the Swifts rush screaming past the eaves to serenade their sitting mates, to be joined sometimes by the bats, so late do they linger? Against the evening sky one may recognize

the noctule or great-bat by its bold flight, broken by sudden downward swoops.

The Corncrake becomes silent towards the end of the month, but the Nightjar still reels from the heath where it hunts the white moths above the dewy fern. In wood and copse the pageant of summer passes in stately progress, garlanded with wild flowers, while butterflies, such as the large and gaily painted fritillaries, dash proudly by or sun themselves upon the heads of thistle and scabious. In the plantation the cooing of Wood Pigeons is still heard, though the voice of the Turtle has ceased. If a change passes over the day, and from some dark cloud comes a clap of thunder, the cock Pheasants crow in answer to it. In the same way the noise of blasting or of cannon will always draw from them a defiant challenge. The Swifts seem to revel in thundery weather ; their screaming is never more shrill and piercing than in the height of a storm. And after the rain passes and the sun comes out, who has not wondered at the swarm of tiny frogs upon the steaming road, limbs just developed and tail—last badge of tadpoledom—but newly absorbed ?

The coveys of young Partridges are on the wing. The Chaffinches flocking upon the first bare stubbles, and the Starlings racing over the meadow, or rising in a cloud to wheel and manœuvre as one bird, herald the larger assemblages of autumn. In some quiet inlet of the lake amongst pond-weed and sedges, hide

the Wild Ducks, now all alike in plumage, for the drakes have undergone that curious transformation of dress which for nearly five months of the year renders them indistinguishable from their sober-coloured mates. Some broods of "flappers," not yet flying, take refuge amongst the reeds, which also afford shelter to the white-fronted Coots, each followed by her brood of young in black down with some rusty red about the head.

It is not too late for those who seek the sea in July to find much of interest about the sand-dunes and shingle-beaches of the coast. The shifting dunes, held together by the wiry marram-grass, form a miniature desert where every passer-by—rabbit, bird, lizard or insect—leaves a characteristic track in the finely sifted sand.

Where tracts of shingle and shell-beaches fringe the sand-dunes, the Ring Plover pipe anxiously, and the eye may chance to light on the four eggs, resting, like miniature peewits' point to point, in a slight hollow which, whatever may be said to the contrary, the bird often lines with a carefully laid mosaic of small stones and bits of shell. Or the young, a little ball of grey cotton-wool on stilts, may be found running over the foreshore or squatting flat upon the shingle, in every tint and shade part and parcel of its surroundings. Here, too, Oyster-catchers, whose black and white dress has earned for them the name of "sea-pie,"

shriek their anxious fears as to the security of hidden young or dart up with a shrill vituperation at a passing gull. Graceful in shape and spotless in plumage is the Little Tern which shares the same haunt, laying its eggs upon the foreshore, so little above the highest tide-mark as to leave but a narrow margin of safety. We have known all three, plover, oyster-catcher and tern, to have nests within a couple of yards of each other. The handsome Shelducks leave the sand-bars and oozy channels in which they love to paddle, to lay their eggs in deserted rabbit-burrows in the midst of the warren. Their beautifully contrasted plumage of white, chestnut and green renders them an ornament to the parts of the coast where they are found.

Not less strange is the choice of the Stock Dove, which will often nest in a similar burrow at a depth of two or three feet, having as neighbour the Wheatear, which flicks its white tail and " chacks " noisily in every little hollow of the dunes. The plants of the sand-waste—sea-holly, houndstongue, sea bind-weed—are not less characteristic than its birds ; even its insects and land-shells will be found to be peculiar to itself.

In spite of the wealth of beauty which it brings, July marks one of the turning points of the year, for towards the end of the month one has a feeling that summer, if not exactly upon the wane, has at least passed its meridian. Daylight lingers less long and

STOCK DOVES AND NEST.

From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

twilight shuts down more abruptly. Nature marks the epoch in her calendar by the flowering of the hair bell, of the heather, and of the dwarf-furze which lends a golden glow to the rough slopes from now onwards till October. The first returning visitors from the north—Dunlin and Sanderling, Whimbrel and Turnstone—reach our shores, to wade in the shallows or pick up sand-hoppers from the masses of drifted weed.

At the very end of the month certain birds, as the Chiffchaft and Willow Wren, commence to sing again in a quiet subdued manner. The Chaffinch, too, begins his broken song of late summer, but an imperfect echo of the rattling challenge which he threw to his mates in May. And the Robin on the rose-trellis warbles a low and slender strain which has in it a foretaste of autumn and of leafless boughs. It is the writing upon the wall which tells of coming change and of the passing of all that summer brings.

SEA-FOWL HAUNTS.

Sea-birds are not as a rule early breeders, and July finds the fullest activity still prevailing in the great sea-fowl nurseries which are scattered round our coasts. There are low islets above which the graceful terns hover thick as snowflakes, reef and skerry tenanted by cormorant and gull, stacks and pinnacles about whose

rocky ledges guillemots and razorbills swarm like bees, outlying hummocks capped with peat in which are the burrows of shearwater and petrel and the far western, sea-girt haunts of gannet and fulmar. All these varied scenes of bird life, often in wild and picturesque setting, may be found around our shores.

We may take our stand upon the bold chalk cliffs of Flamborough, which front the North Sea like a great white wall and overlook its restless waves from such a height that they are dwarfed to a tracery of finest ripples. Or we may stand where the grim overhanging front of Spanish Head, with its memories of the ruined Armada, looks across the narrow sound to the Calf of Man. Or shall we choose some remote spot upon the coast of Western Wales where rent and twisted strata, stacks and natural arch combine to form rock scenery of wild and varied type? As each swell passes the water gurgles and spurts from a blow-hole, and its hoarse, hollow murmur is heard as it ebbs and flows into dismal caverns haunted by otter and seal. Not less suited to our purpose are parts of the Irish coast, where the black and jagged cliffs are brilliant with patches of the white campion, sulphur kidney-vetch or rose sea-pink.

To enjoy a general survey of such a sea-bird colony we must take a boat and cruise along the foot of the cliffs. Earth, air and water teem with birds. Heavy

flying Guillemots and Razorbills whizz past overhead. Single birds, select parties, whole fleets of them—always in company with Puffins—paddle at ease, dive, bob up again like corks, splash along the surface of the water or rise clumsily, adjusting their steering gear by spreading feet and tail. Puffins swim up close to the boat; one of them will retain its hold upon the first-caught slippery fry, diving for more, until a whole string of them depends from its beak. A few weeks later there will be many young guillemots, which could never have made their way down from the ledges without parental assistance, each one swimming in the wake of the old bird.

Now to change one's standpoint to the verge of the cliff, or reach, by the aid of a friendly gulley, some point midway between its top story and the basement. All the grassy ledges are peopled by Herring Gulls, whose mottled young have mostly reached the sea, though some remain at the nests. Every suitable spot on the cliff face, where the rough grass covers earth of a sufficient depth to be burrowed into, is a warren of Puffins; their orange feet show up as spots of colour against the dark background. On the barer ledges stand the Guillemots, shoulder to shoulder, nodding their heads as if bowing to one another. We can see their bright green eggs on narrow exposed ledges where, if they rolled a couple of inches, they would go over the edge. No eggs are more wonderful in their beauty

of varied coloration and marking than those of the Guillemot.

Further down are the Kittiwakes' nests—real nests of sea-weed, properly rounded and hollowed—seemingly glued to the face of the cliff and standing out from it like brackets. It is a busy scene and a novel one; the Razorbills and Guillemots darting down to the waves in a constant stream, some tossing on the waves light and buoyant as corks, others arriving at the ledges and struggling for foothold, uttering meanwhile a hoarse guttural note, which, mingling with the "kitty-wauk," "kitty-wauk" of the dove-like kittiwakes on the ledges and the cackling and barking of the larger gulls above, forms a strange and weird chorus. A pair of Great Black-backed Gulls laugh gruffly overhead.

Every outcrop of rock and, here and there, the edge of the cliff itself, is tenanted by Puffins, all standing upright, all with spotlessly white breasts and gorgeous bills. The eye wearies of regiments of puffins in endless perspective. Some are constantly arriving from the sea and alighting with a plump on the rocks, giving a little flutter with their wings to steady themselves. The Razorbills in their black dress-coats the picture of prim respectability, are, if anything, more ridiculously tame than the puffins. Their eggs are in holes or under overhanging boulders, but never far back or in regular burrows like those of the puffin.

PUFFINS FEEDING THEIR YOUNG.
From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

An indescribable and all-pervading smell, as of ancient and decaying fish, clings to these bird-whitened cliffs, and becomes more pronounced when Cormorants are present to add variety to the scene by their odd gestures and vulturine aspect. On their favourite perch they preen themselves with much writhing of their snaky necks. One sits with its beak pointing almost vertically upwards; another spreads its wings to dry, and rests with them expanded like some giant vampire. The cormorant gives a unique instance of a bird which is not in its best plumage in the breeding season, for the slight crest, silvery neck-hackles and white thigh-patch of the nuptial period are lost almost before nesting begins.

In one instance well known to us, the breeding place of the Cormorants is a jagged rock rising some thirty feet out of the sea, a narrow channel of clear, green water separating it from a larger island. Upon the summit, which appears as if it had received a coat of snow, sit the birds, looking at a distance like so many wine-bottles. If we invade their stronghold, the young birds, which are full-grown but not yet able to fly, tumble over the stones and fall into the pools of liquid filth in their endeavour to escape, while others blow out their cheeks and pouches and cluck threateningly. Others again, more nervous, essay a first flight to the sea, but first lighten ship by throwing up the remains of their last meal. An old cormorant comes in from

the sea to feed its young, and we can watch the whole performance. The old bird, with head down, wide-open mouth and flapping wings, is surrounded by scuffling, fluttering young, which put their heads one by one into its mouth and seize the savoury morsels from its pouch. The newly-hatched young have bare, purplish skins, and are ugly as juvenile harpies. The whole affords a scene of novel, though malodorous, interest.

Apart from the true sea-fowl, there are other birds which share their haunts, living sometimes upon the most neighbourly terms with the toilers of the deep, at other times as undesirable hangers-on of whose presence the colony would gladly be rid. To the latter class belongs the Peregrine Falcon, which may often be found breeding in a haunt of sea-birds in the midst of the most thickly-populated ledges. Its harsh outcry is heard above the general clamour and as it passes with a bold sweep out to sea, sometimes making a feint of stooping at a slow, heavy-flying cormorant to the consternation of the latter, the lazy gulls are soon left behind. Aloft, Kestrels show the silvery underside of their wings as they glide and swerve, having as neighbours the Rock Dove and the sable Chough. The Rock Dove, ancestor of our tame pigeons, is so often found intermixed with stock escaped from neighbouring dove-cotes, and more or less reverted to type, that we shall scarcely find the

breed in its full purity at Flamborough, or indeed nearer than the wave-washed precipices of the west coast of Scotland or of Connemara, where, as in the case of the grand Meenawn Cliffs of Achil Island, it nests in caves which are filled with the mist of the sea-spray. Here, too, though gone wholly or almost so from its ancient haunts on the Cornish coast, is the red-billed Chough, most active in flight and pleasing in appearance of the crow tribe. As it flies lightly and swiftly, rising and falling in graceful curves, the eye is pleased with the contrast which the chough presents to the white-winged gulls and its shrill note makes itself heard above the roar of the surges and the whistle of ocean breeze. Yet for some reason apart from the fact that collectors are always ready to pay a good price for its eggs, the chough decreases in numbers, and has vanished from wide stretches of coast which formerly knew it well.

And what is the small bird, dark olive in colour with spotted breast, which haunts the bare rocky ledges of the gull islands, the grassy slopes of the cliffs and the boulders and seaweed on the shore? It is not a land bird which has strayed from its proper haunt, for the true home of the Rock Pipit is close to the breaking waves and salt sea spray, and its sharp note is the proper accompaniment of old ocean's wildest music. Strange is it, too, to see the House Martins plastering rows of mud-built tenements under the

shelter of overhanging ledges in the thick of the sea-bird colony, just as they do on many a limestone cliff inland, as in Derbyshire or West Yorkshire. Such must have been the original nesting haunts of the species as a whole until, with the advent of house-building man, a large proportion of them came to utilise his eaves. The list of these associates and allies might be extended—we have found a corncrakes' nest upon a lonely islet amongst the terns' eggs, which lay so thickly that it was impossible to avoid treading on them—but those which have been mentioned are the most ordinary supernumeraries in scenes where the sea-birds themselves play the chief part.

CALENDAR FOR JULY.

July 1st.—Young Partridges flying.
,, 2nd.—Redshanks flocking.
,, 3rd.—Young Kingfishers still in the nest.
,, 4th.—Some young Lapwings but newly-hatched.
,, 5th.—Most Cuckoos silent.
,, 7th.—Young Blackbirds of late brood leave the nest.
,, 8th.—Young Robins of late brood leave the nest.
,, 10th.—Young Kestrels still in the nest.
,, 11th.—Young Herons perching close to nest.
,, 12th.—Sedge Warbler still has eggs.
Young Red-backed Shrikes leave the nest
,, 13th.—Young Sparrow-hawks still in the nest.
,, 15th.—Cuckoo last heard.
Common Sandpipers resort to the coast.

July 16th.—Song Thrush still has eggs.
,, 17th.—Mistle Thrushes flocking.
,, 19th.—Young Nightjars not yet fledged.
,, 21st.—Skylark still has eggs.
,, 22nd.—Corncrake ceases to call.
Young Common Whitethroats of second brood leave the nest.
,, 23rd.—Song Thrush ceases to sing.
,, 25th.—Some Skylarks still sing freely.
,, 26th.—Turtle Doves cease to coo.
,, 27th.—Robin, Chiffchaff, Willow Wren, and Chaffinch begin to sing again.
,, 29th.—Whimbrel arrives on the coast.
,, 30th.—Chaffinches and Linnets flocking.
,, 31st.—Grey Plover, Turnstone, Greenshank, Knot, Curlew-Sandpiper and Sanderling arrive on the coast on their return from the North.

Bird Life in August

Bird Life in August

WHAT becomes of the birds in August? They seem to disappear. Of course this does not apply to birds which are constantly to be seen in the open, as rooks, starlings, lapwings, swallows. But the silence of the woods is scarcely broken by a single note. How little stir and movement of feathered things is there in the lanes, along the hedge-rows, in thicket and plantation. The explanation is simple. August is the moulting month. Presumably birds feel "off colour," a little shabby in dress, not up to the effort of song, disinclined for society. The gay tints and ornaments of nuptial dress are replaced by a quieter and more sober scheme of coloration as the change occurs to what is known as winter plumage.

To discuss the different cases in which the moult is complete or only partial, and those in which a modification of tint occurs by a change in the colour of individual feathers, without their being shed, would lead us too far afield. But the result is the same; for the time being birds do not feel at their best. Occasionally one may even be seen unable to fly from loss of quills,—good reason enough for wishing to

avoid observation. Even the tits, irrepressible as a rule, are but little in evidence. In short, there is no month when birds lend less of colour and cheerful activity to the country-side, in keeping with the fact that August landscapes are less bright and varied than those of either the preceding or the succeeding month.

Wild flowers are largely over; foliage has lost its freshness and has the dull and tarnished look which it will wear until touched by the dying glories which precede its fall. The hedges along the main roads are covered with a coating of dust, which grows ever deeper as the automobile multiplies and spreads through the land. Beside such highways dust hangs heavy on the feathery-seeded clematis, renders the blackberries uneatable, hides the deepening crimson of hips and haws. Happy the country-lanes which are exempt from the passage of the destroyer of rural peace, the hot chalk-banks alive with butterflies, the low-lying meads where the grass, helped by the heavy morning dews of late summer, deepens into a rich aftermath.

A moderately wet August tends to preserve the beauties of summer leafage, while drought brings the sere and yellow leaf before its time. In time of drought, as of frost, the thrushes search the hedge-bottoms to turn out the yellow-banded snails. Then the shrunken ponds yield the carrion-crow a feast of fresh-water mussels. Then, too, assaults upon the fruit-garden become more frequent and systematic.

All are agreed that the blackbird is in this respect a much greater offender than the thrush. The blackcap, garden-warbler and whitethroat have a special weakness for raspberries, while a magpie, gobbling furtively, will soon thin the produce of a gooseberry bush. Be it put to the credit of the cuckoo upon the other hand, that it visits gardens in quest of the saw-fly grub,—a well-known pest which often clears the bushes of every leaf. Nightingales, too, often pay the garden a visit, tempted not so much by the fruit as by the "green fly" and other insects which are to be found amongst the peas and kidney-beans. But we fancy that many nightingales have left us, or at any rate withdrawn towards the coast, by the end of the month. For in August those of our summer birds which are the first to leave are already upon the move. Not only of the cuckoo is it true that "come August, go he must"; the incoming of the month brings to others their marching orders. While the House Martins congregate in the early mornings to bask on sunny roofs and the Swallows collect on the telegraph wires as if to choose leaders and make up travelling parties, the sickle-winged Swifts, which screamed round the eaves, have already disappeared, the twentieth of the month marking their average date of departure. Thus, almost the last to come, they are amongst the first to go. How different is the departure of the summer birds as, unmarked, they

silently steal away, from their arrival which was heralded by the music of their voices on every side.

Migration chiefly occurs at night, and, even upon the south or east coast, we may be unaware of what is taking place, unless we notice the large flights of swifts all pointing southward, an unusual number of turtle-doves on the oat-stubble near the edge of the cliff, or find cuckoos and nightjars sheltering amongst the marram-grass and stunted tamarisks above the foreshore, where they certainly would not be met with under ordinary circumstances. They are waiting for a favourable opportunity to make the passage of the Channel. The Common Sandpiper leaves the hill pools and mountain tarns to spend the remainder of its stay beside the lowland brooks. The Curlew deserts the high sheep-walks for the coast; and the Grey Wagtail abandons the burns and trout streams, where it has spent the summer in flitting from stone to stone amongst the eddies and ripples, to reappear at the same runnel of water by the roadside where, winter after winter, we never fail to note it.

In the case of a few birds the breeding season, which practically closed in July, is prolonged until mid-August, but, as a rule, only by isolated pairs whose domestic arrangements have been thrown out of gear by mishaps earlier in the season. There is nothing unusual in finding a nest of young greenfinches or yellow-hammers when the month has half run its

PIED WAGTAILS AND NEST.

From case in British Museum, South Kensington.

course. With the goldfinch, too, family duties often run on well into August. Some ring-doves are flocking, but others are still cooing in the plantations, and are likely enough to bring off a late brood this month or next. The moorhens' nest, in a tuft of flags bordering the old moat, still contains eggs, as does also the floating heap of water-weeds which serves the dabchick as a nursery. These exceptions merely serve to show up the fact that with August we have reached the extreme fag-end of the breeding season, upon the close of which the moult follows as a natural sequence. The young of the earlier broods have indeed left far behind them the inexperience of nestling days, and begin to put on the *toga virilis*, the garb of their elders. In the case of the young chaffinches and bullfinches the reddening breasts of the cocks now indicate their sex. We may even surprise the young blackbirds in transition dress, with patches of black showing amongst the spotted brown of their nestling plumage. Amongst the young wild-ducks, too, it is now easy to pick out the drakes. In other cases juvenile dress is worn for a much longer period. A young shrike only showed himself in his true colours, as a fine male bird, after eight months residence in our aviary.

Upon the coast the young gulls furnish the uninitiated with a standing puzzle. There are spotted Black-backs and Herring Gulls, fresh from the nesting

ledges, bearing not the least resemblance to their elders, young Black-headed Gulls in mixed brown and white livery, hailing from their gullery upon some Norfolk "broad" or North Lancashire "moss," while, further to complicate matters, the young Common Gulls, bred upon the Highland lochs, now make their appearance, to be dubbed "blue" or "speckled" Gulls by the east coast fishermen. One welcomes such a distinctive mark as the black collar by which the young Kittiwake may be known in a moment. With the larger gulls the adult dress is only gradually assumed; apparently not till the fourth or fifth year is it complete in every detail. The relationship of the young Cormorants, brown-backed and white-fronted, to their sable elders, is also far from being evident at the first glance.

Though bird-voices in August are quiet and subdued, yet a few songs break the general silence. Foremost are those of the several members of the bunting family, —late in song because late to breed. The Yellow-hammer's lilt is still heard by the dusty roadside, where as a perch he seems to prefer the telegraph wires to the twigs of bush and briar which suit the taste of finch and linnet. How many know the Cirl Bunting?—a yellow-hammer but for his black throat and for his song which is in a different key and wants the yellow-hammer's final flourish, being in fact a monotonous trill, to be syllabled as "zi, zi, zi."

Yet, the cirl-bunting is common enough no further from London than the chalk downs of Surrey, where it nests by preference in the juniper-bushes. We have met with it in Devonshire, close to the locality where the naturalist Montagu first recognized it as a British bird, and in the ferny coombes of the Welsh coast.

It is exceptional to hear the thrush sing in August, but the wren still sounds his tiny clarion, singing, like the tree-creeper, in any month of the year, even at times in hard frost. The chaffinch is often in half-song; chiffchaff and willow-wren sing in what old Gilbert White calls "a soft and inward manner," and the robin pipes a few strains from the orchard bough. But these summer songs are lacking in spirit and energy they are merely an expression of contentment with easy times of warmth and abundance, and are not inspired by the delicious madness which fills the throats of the choristers of spring. When in company with their fellows, birds are naturally more lively and inclined for vocal effort. Flocks of Linnets go trooping over the weed-grown fallows, singing and twittering in concert, and a crowd of Starlings, settling thickly in the elm-tops, warbles and whistles in unison, making a noise which at a distance sounds like that of running water. But many voices of the earlier summer we now miss entirely. By the time that the harvest moon rises full over the hill, and the long-tongued hawk-moths poise before the white trumpet-flowers of the

nicotiana at dusk, the corncrake has become silent, and the nightjar no longer "churrs," though we may surprise it some warm day basking and dusting like a barn-door fowl in the middle of the sandy path which leads to the heath.

August sees the ripening of the first hedge-row fruits and berries, bringing to the birds a foretaste of the rich harvest which is to follow. Amongst the first come the scarlet cluster of the mountain-ash, so beloved of thrush and blackbird that the whole crop is sometimes cleared off within a week. The Mistle Thrush, largest and boldest of his kind, usually comes in for the lion's share. See him as he balances with difficulty by the help of wings and tail, reaching greedily hither and thither after the ruddy fruit, even venturing in quest of it into town gardens and close to the windows of houses, strewing the ground beneath the tree with berries dropped in his haste. It is the flocking of the mistle-thrushes in late summer which leads country observers to write to the papers from time to time reporting an unusually early arrival of the fieldfare. Both are large thrushes, which have a harsh note and show the white undersides of their wings as they fly—hence the error.

The interest of the stout-billed Hawfinch in fruits and berries of this kind is of a different nature; when seen visiting the mountain-ash or cotoneaster he is in quest of the seed-kernels which he obtains by crushing

their hard, stony investment. The Greenfinch, on the other hand, when enjoying the red, fruity part of the " hips " of the dog-rose, may be seen to throw aside the bristle-coated nutlets or " seeds." The Sparrows, nesting duties over, betake themselves to the cornfields and by over indulgence in grain forfeit any claim to consideration based upon the fact that they rear their young chiefly upon green caterpillars. The noisy crowd of them, disturbed by farmer's boy with his " clappers," rises from the stooks to cover the hedge-top. But, mindful only of the danger which is evident, they wot not of a silent and stealthy foe who glides round the corner of the fence. In a moment the sparrow-hawk has singled out his victim—a plump young bird, not yet strong upon the wing. Not only for men and sparrows is it harvest time ; the hawks, too, in late summer, find a plentiful table.

In the latter part of August, Guillemots, Puffins, and other sea-fowl desert the cliffs. The story of the month would not be complete without mention of the flights of wading birds, Greenshank, Knot, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Stints, Godwits, and the like, which, coming from the North, alight upon our coasts, preferring the muddy estuaries and oozy channels of the Eastern Counties. With them sometimes comes an Avocet, Spoonbill or Stork, but the chance of a visit from one of these distinguished strangers is much greater in the month of May. The Whimbrel is about

the coast throughout the month, and the flocks of Dunlin are largely reinforced, many of the birds still showing the black breast of the breeding plumage. In fact, now that the ties of home and family are relaxed, a general shifting of quarters ensues, and through the next few weeks the night skies will be alive with bird-notes as the travellers call to their fellows, and myriads of tired wings will skim the waves of the misty Channel. But, as successive departures thin the ranks of the summer birds, the arrivals of autumn and winter guests are so numerous that we scarcely mark our loss.

MOUNTAIN AND MOOR.

August is, and bids fair to remain, the great holiday month. Happily when we are able to turn our backs upon the madding crowd mountain turf is still fresh and springy, and the moors, so late to respond to the touch of spring, are crowned with the full glory of the heather. And what a choice lies open to us, even south of the Border. Shall we follow up the torrent as it rushes down from Llyn Llydau, hurrying on in fall and water-slide to the valley, till we see in front of us the sovran peak of Y Wyddfa, flanked on the left by the great precipices of Lliwedd and on the right by the lofty knife-edge of Crib Goch ? Or shall we bear with the humours of Lake District weather, and watch

the mists drive up the pass in slow, spectral procession, black storm-hidden crags above and milk-white torrents racing down the hillsides, until, with a sudden shift of wind, Scawfell's brotherhood of summits stands out bold and clear and sunny gleams turn Grasmere's leaden waters to silver? Or, yet again, shall we tramp knee-deep in heather over trackless moors, trampling out perfume with every step which scatters the dusty pollen?

But our main business after all, is with the birds, and few will fail to appreciate the added charm which their presence gives to the wild scenery of which they form a part. The fly-fisher hears the piping of the sandpiper by the edge of some lonely tarn, rouses the heron from his solitary fishing, or sees the dipper shaking off the water as he emerges from the spray of the fall. The rock climber, negotiating an awkward "chimney" or gulley, is conscious of the rush of wings as raven or buzzard passes, apparently not uninterested in the possibility of a fatal termination to his adventure, and even the tweed-clad sportsman of "the twelfth," though his chief concern is naturally with "the birds," often has an eye for the minor feathered folk—twite, ring-ouzel, golden-plover and the like—which share the grouse-cock's home.

By mid-August the Ring Ouzels have cleared off most of the bilberries, which form their staple food earlier in the summer, and have come lower to the

"ghylls" or "cloughs" to whose rocky sides clings a fringe of birch or rowan, the red berries of the latter being as attractive to them as to their cousins the mistle-thrushes. Below the edge of the moor the Twites or Mountain Linnets flock to the crofter's weedy patch of oat stubble, now gay with charlock and corn-marigold. A single plaintive call from a neighbouring fallow draws attention to a Golden Plover; as it runs to take wing, a whole flock of its fellows, previously unseen, starts up to bear it company.

The Green Woodpecker often wanders out into the open, miles away from trees, in search of ants' nests upon the warm moorland slopes. Of small birds the Meadow Pipit and Wheatear are perhaps most characteristic of the high sheep-walks and mountain moorlands. Every rocky "kopje" has its pair of wheatears. They delight in the tumbled blocks of millstone grit which overlook the Derbyshire moors, or in such a craggy citadel as that which forms the summit of Glyder Fach, where thirty-foot slabs, tossed at random, suggest a dozen ruined Stonehenges. Toilsome is the pull up, but, the cairn once gained, we breathe enchanted air, serene and fair, while evening shafts of light stream from Tryfan's crest and the mountains, of a deep neutral grey, float in a setting of rosy haze. As we scramble, we disturb a family party of Ravens. With rapid flights to ledge and brow, excited croaks and growling bark, the old birds muster and draw

off their brood, long since, of course, strong upon the wing. To our surprise we find the red-billed Chough, usually a bird of the sea-cliffs, haunting the precipices of Snowdon, where apparently it nests in the shafts of the disused copper-mines. The Welsh Rooks, too, though they do not range so high, are fond of a change to the mountain sheep-walks as soon as nesting duties are over.

Such uplands have their characteristic insects, as seen in the Lake District, where we meet with the Mountain Ringlet, a scarce, dull-coloured, sub-alpine butterfly. Or further, crying truce to the birds, one may range the line of crags in search of rare plants, to find shady recesses where water drips from cushions of saxifrage and hanging fringes of moss, to reach with doubtful foothold the rose lychnis, restricted to a few rocky ledges of a single fell, or to mark underfoot the Alpine lady's mantle with its fingered leaflets silken-fringed. The ledges are thick with mountain plants as we push up this narrow gulley, so steep that the loose stones underfoot slip and roll. There is a dank wall of rock on either side, and at length, as the rill slides down one of the steps of its water-worn staircase, the smooth face of stone, slippery with spray and greenery, bars further progress.

One bird we never fail to meet with in the most remote and rocky of mountain solitudes, namely, the

Wren. This is a fact which the bird books do not appear to notice when they write its biography, but certain it is that in lonely corrie or amidst a chaos of tumbled boulders the song of the wren rings out—sole voice of living thing—as cheerily as in lane and thicket. Our sizeable wild animals are now so few that one is glad to hear of red-deer lingering in the Martindale fells, and of the marten-cat still finding a home in the wilder recesses of Borrowdale. The fox ranges high into the hills ; we have seen it loping leisurely across a ridge close to the summit of Snowdon.

Yet another bird of the mountain tops remains to be mentioned,—not the ptarmigan which at the present day is not found south of the border,—but the Dotterel, if indeed this choice and dainty little plover still breeds upon the Lake District mountains, where twenty years ago its numbers had almost reached the vanishing point. For, esteemed by the epicure, its feathers were still more coveted by the trout-fisher for the manufacture of artificial flies. An old shepherd tells us that the birds fetched 3s. 6d. each,—small wonder that they vanished. It is useless to look for the dotterel except upon the mountain summits, the land of grey mists, where there is a loose shale underfoot, or in places a dark, woolly, alpine moss. Here, if fortune favours, the bird may start up close before us with a weak, plover note, or run tamely over the patches of stones, stopping from time to

time to pick up an insect. Sometimes we notice a backward jerk of the head, and recollect the old idea of the dotterel imitating the movements of the fowler. It was a red-letter day when, after watching the birds till we were stiff and chilled to the marrow, we found the two eggs in a slight hollow of the moss, for nest there was none. One of the birds in its anxiety threw itself on the ground, its wings a little raised and quivering, its white-tipped tail spread to a perfect fan,—the whole attitude much like that of a partridge covering young, or still more that of a night-jar feigning wounded. On a subsequent occasion this bird allowed us to stoop and touch it before it left the nest. Strange that in the case of the dotterel, as in that of some of the other waders, it is the male bird which takes the chief share in incubation, being, in accordance with this but in striking contrast to the general rule, somewhat smaller and duller-coloured than his mate. "The hen is the finer bird" as our old shepherd concisely puts it.

Now to leave the wind-swept summit for the deep hollows, carved in the mountain's flank, where birch and stunted oak cling to the face of the crags. Here we shall have as music the Buzzard's wild and melancholy cry, and may see the big hawk floating lazily on upraised wings or mounting in a great spiral till it becomes a mere speck in the blue. Usually considered a timid or cowardly bird, we are prepared

to contest this view, for, when its nest is threatened, the buzzard will sometimes swoop at the intruder with great spirit. A friend of ours while climbing in a particularly awkward spot upon a Welsh cliff was thus "held up" for at least an hour by an angry buzzard. Another, in the Lake District, pushed the attack so closely that its wing was broken by a blow from a stick, showing lack of discretion perhaps but certainly not of valour.

Between mountain and moor comes a fringe of copse where every bank is carpeted with the delicate fronds of beech and oak-fern, and where in wet spots the stately *osmunda* rears its five-foot fronds and golden spore heads. This, rather than the open moor, is the haunt of the Black Game, and here we may chance to put up a noble black-cock which goes off as if with no intention of stopping short of the next county. Would that we could be present at one of those gatherings in the frosty dawn of a March morning when the black-cocks strut and spread their tails and spar at one another and scuffle for the edification of the assembled grey-hens. But the Black Grouse is far from being such a favourite as its kinsman of the moors,—a bird which the true sportsman regards with patriotic pride, for the Red Grouse is supposed to be the only one of our native birds which is entirely confined to Britain. The more general view, however, is to look upon it as an island race of the Willow Grouse, so widely diffused in

Northern Europe and Arctic America, which owing to milder winters, has given up the practice of donning white, or partially white, plumage in winter. Be that as it may, the plucky little game bird is with many a sportsman the central figure in memories of halcyon days, sweet with the scent of heather-bells and bog myrtle, redolent of the reek of peat-smoke from the keeper's cottage, reminiscent of the long line of beaters working down towards the butts, of the clever working of the dogs when an off-day is given to " walking them up." The object of a pursuit which brings health and happiness, esteemed in death and treated to posthumous honours, long may the grouse-cock remain the glory of north-country moorlands.

CALENDAR FOR AUGUST.

August 1st.—Chaffinch's summer song heard.
,, 3rd.—Ring Doves flocking.
,, 4th.—Young Spotted Flycatchers of late brood leave the nest.
,, 8th.—Starlings begin to sing from the chimney-pots.
,, 11th.—Young Barn Owls snoring in the nest.
,, 12th.—Young Turtle Doves still in the nest.
,, 13th.—Many Swifts seen on migration.
Hawfinch at mountain-ash berries.
,, 14th.—Young Yellow-hammers still in the nest
Herons still come from their nests.
,, 17th.—Cirl Bunting sings.
,, 18th.—Young Bullfinches still in the nest.

August 19th.—Young Greenfinches of late brood ready to fly.
,, 20th.—Swift last seen (average date).
,, 21st.—Coal Tit's note heard.
,, 22nd.—Dipper or Water Ouzel sings.
Sand Martins congregate to roost in reeds.
,, 23rd.—A late Goldfinches' nest with eggs.
House Martins congregate.
,, 24th.—Tree Creeper sings.
,, 25th.—Golden Plover flocking.
,, 26th.—Grey Wagtail returns from its breeding-haunts.
,, 29th.—Some Ring Doves still coo
,, 31st.—Common Bunting sings.

Bird Life in September

Bird Life in September

WHILE there is no month of the English summer which may not belie the name, surely September may claim to inspire a feeling not far removed from confidence, so seldom does it fail to bring day and night skies of perfect serenity, accompanied by a stillness of atmosphere rarely known at any other time of year. How often within the memory of all has September thus redeemed the summer. For the lingering smile of summer is still over the land, red berries in the hedges, stubbles fast becoming bare, clusters of nuts on the hazels. Some morning towards the end of the month, what time the bracken-covered slopes have turned to russet, the horse-chestnuts are pranked in ruddy gold and the virginia-creeper flames against the gable end of the old manor-house, one wakes to find the first touch of autumn freshness in the air. A white frost early on has laid its finger on tomatoes, marrows, and kidney-beans. All that remains by the time the sun is well up is that keen breath which brings fresh zest to life, alike to birds and men. There is a general revival of the feathered folk, for the moult is behind

them while food of all kinds is plentiful and will be so for many weeks to come.

Now the tits recommence their notes; the thrush begins to sing again and skylarks soar as blithely as in spring. Thus, in late September, autumn and summer strive for mastery. The sun has not power the dry the dew which lies all day long upon the aftermath in sheltered bottoms, while it is still strong enough to tempt out the basking lizard, to set the grasshopper trilling upon a sunny slope and to bring out the late butterflies, admirals and peacocks, which hang balancing upon the scabious heads or hover round the clump of Michaelmas daisies.

Yet the genial September days when the ivy flowers, providing a honied feast for flies and bees innumerable, fail to tempt our summer birds to a longer stay. By far the greater number of them make the Channel passage before the oncoming of the rough weather, which often follows closely on the equinox, though it may be delayed far into the autumn. Quietly they withdraw, and in the greater stir and animation of those birds which winter with us, finding their voices after the moult and coming once more into the open, their going is little marked. One day a chattering or scolding note tells us that the Sedge Warbler is still in its accustomed haunt beside the pond; the next day we may search the tangle of meadow-sweet and purple loosetrife for it in vain. A Cuckoo, a young bird of

the year, perches tamely on the wire fence of the paddock long after its elders have gone, proof sufficient that, in this case at least, migration is independent of leadership, for, when its time comes, it will find the palms and temples of the South as easily as if personally conducted. Swallows and House Martins are still with us, and should be seen well into October, but, if rough, chilly weather sets in, they are ready to ante-date their time of departure, and, after struggling against the wind for a day or two, sometimes hawking low to pick up insects from the herbage, they will leave in a body before September is out, not unfrequently abandoning a belated brood or two in the nest.

Of the myriads which leave us how small a proportion returns in the spring, bearing witness to the perils which beset the migratory flight, and lending countenance to the generally-expressed opinion that both swallows and martins decrease in number from year to year. One may take comfort in seeing the Sand Martins still swarming about their burrows in the soft sand and gravel cliffs of the East Coast, so exactly fitted for their tunnelling that they seem to flourish there as nowhere else, and in counting one hundred and ninety nests of the House Martin under the eaves of a large Essex flour-mill, but the stress of wet and chilly summers falls upon them heavily, as also the persecution to which when nesting, they are subjected at the hands of the common house-sparrow, hence their failure to hold

their own. Those migrants which showed their superior hardiness by being the first to come are amongst the last to go. The Wheatear lingers for some time longer about the sand-dunes and warrens of the coast, and the Chiffchaff may be seen, often hawking for the flies attracted by the flowering ivy, until October is well under weigh. The Pied Wagtails and Meadow Pipits collect in the meadows and upon low-lying flats in preparation for moving southward. In fact the migratory flocks of pipits are as familiar a feature at this time of year as they were upon their return in spring. The birds move in leisurely fashion, and will often spend the greater part of a day chasing and playing about a sunny slope.

It is to arrivals from the North that we must look to fill the ranks thinned by the departure of the soft-billed summer birds. The Snipe come to reinforce the numbers, comparatively small, of their kindred which have remained with us to breed. Flights of waders—Godwit and Knot, Greenshank and Grey Plover—settle upon the mud-banks and oozy channels of the coast, often to pass on after a few hours of rest. The Wigeon, first of the "flight ducks" to reach us, pitch in sheltered bays and upon tidal waters, where also the Divers once more appear, following the southward movements of sprat and herring. Many of them are young birds, and the old ones no longer show the distinctive plumage which they exhibit during the

BLACK-THROATED DIVER.
Photo—O. G. Pike.

breeding season upon Highland loch or Norwegian fjord.

But for a re-opening burst of song late in the month from thrushes and skylarks, the songsters of September are practically the same as those of August. Should we not give a word of acknowledgment, however, to the Pied Wagtail's sprightly ditty, heard as it runs briskly on the roof hawking flies, often springing into the air to come lightly down again? In mild and favoured districts of the West Country, one may hear the Woodlark's flute-like notes, uttered as it flies to-and-fro overhead, seemingly quite at random, and often with a wavering bat-like flight, quite unlike the pushful upward mounting to the accompaniment of which the skylark trills. Robins chase one another pugnaciously, warbling little snatches of song, for the young birds begin to show their red breasts, a sign to their elders that they had better go out into the world to fend for themselves. No bird is more attached than the robin to its own special haunt, where it brooks no rival, hence the young hopefuls receive forcible notice to quit, and to the disputes which thus occur is due no doubt the common idea that the young robins kill the old ones in autumn.

Perhaps it is family discussions of the same nature which cause the Brown Owls to be unusually noisy at this time of year. The loud hooting of the old birds, accompanied by the sharp "kee-wick" or

"ty-yack" of the young, is always associated in our mind with these glorious nights when the September moon is at its full. On all sides birds make themselves heard after the silence of the moult. "Yip, yip, yip," squeals a Kestrel, treading air in his usual easy style. At the spot from which he rose hurriedly, we find a lizard's tail still squirming. There is the silver-toned twitter of a "charm" of Goldfinches at the thistle-heads, and, above all, there is the cheerful uproar of the Rooks once more. One must live with a rookery close at hand to understand the manifold activities of the sable folk, all voiced in modulations of a pliant tongue. At present their clamour expresses satisfaction at the improved supply of worms and grubs, due to the falling of the first autumn rains upon the sun-burnt pastures. But there is also the torrent of cawing which the whole flock, with sudden downward swoop, hurls at the head of a fox or other enemy discovered sneaking to cover, and the deafening outburst of comment or condemnation which follows a sudden silence at the conclusion of one of those mysterious conferences known as "crows' courts." We incline to connect the noisy exuberance of the Rooks with the great emergence of *Tipulæ*, popularly craneflies or "daddy longlegs," which takes place about the third week of September. When full grown, the grubs, known as "leather jackets," come to the surface of the ground and place themselves upright in

readiness to turn to pupæ. When the rooks are seen visiting the same meadow day after day and busily pulling up the grass-tufts, it is probable that they are well aware of the feast which is offered. In fact, September spreads a well-filled board for all comers. The wood-pigeons bustle sleepily out of the oaks, so gorged with acorns that they can scarcely fly. For thrush and blackbird, when they have stripped the mountain-ashes, there are the elder-berries. Tits may be seen pecking at the seeds of the sunflower-heads, so attractive, when they have fallen, to the partridges as sometimes to lure these shy birds into country gardens. Nuthatches are most musical and lively, as they vie with the squirrels in despoiling the hazels. Fixing the nut into a crevice of the rough bark, the bird fairly hews out a part of the shell, making a jagged hole through which the kernel is extracted in fragments, the bristles at the end of the tongue forming a useful brush for this purpose. The squirrel's ivory chisels make a far neater job to the same end.

The calm and mellow days of a sunny September see much insect life upon the wing. Sometimes the air is filled with aphides or "green blight," on their way to seek winter quarters or to lay their eggs before they die. And the swarming of the ants, when myriads of them emerge from the nest to take a single short flight upon gauzy wings, though it frequently takes place earlier in the summer, may be continued

into September. Hence it appears that birds which are not cut out for the part are tempted to emulate the flycatcher's art. Certain it is that in these still days we most commonly see the chaffinch or house sparrow dart upwards from its perch and attempt to catch a passing insect. Even starlings may be seen hawking for flies with the exact flight of the house-martin. On several occasions we have seen a number of the small black-headed gulls quartering to-and-fro at a fair height, with short, quick turns and twists quite unlike their usual mode of flight. Were they merely playing, weaving the figures of an aerial dance, in the enjoyment of the finest and warmest weather of the summer, or were they essaying an insect diet? It was impossible to say.

It is perhaps the fact that weather conditions are usually ideal at the time which gives some of its popularity to the "little brown bird" to whose pursuit the opening days of September are consecrated. The grouse-moor must always be for the few, but "the man in the street" may have his few acres of partridge shooting. True, upon the first of September late broods are anything but strong upon the wing, while some young birds are scarcely past the "cheeper" stage. Later in the month the survivors have greatly improved in strength and condition. Exceptionally large coveys are probably seldom the produce of a single nest. Thus in one case known to us, the hen bird having been

killed by a sparrow-hawk, her family amalgamated with another brood, forming a fine joint covey of twenty-five. The light soils of East Anglia seem specially favourable to the Red-legged or French Partridge, less of a favourite than the original breed on account of its habit of running before the dogs. Sometimes in partridge-shooting the unexpected happens. A bevy of quail is flushed, or a corncrake takes wing, but only as a last resource when it can no longer run or hide. As the dogs work down towards the marsh-ditches, a water-rail or spotted-crake may be brought to bag. That scarce visitor, the great-snipe, has a habit of presenting itself to the sportsman as the dogs are working a patch of turnips, a potato-field or a barley stubble where nothing but partridges is expected. Thus our knowledge of the natural history of a district is often indebted to sport for contributions not a few, and more especially to those gunners who, having found a rare bird, proceed to make a note of its occurrence.

THE SACRIFICE TO GAME.

Though the first of October is the date fixed for legal execution of the pheasant, September sees the thinning of the partridge coveys and inaugurates that part of the shooting season which chiefly interests the general public. Hence it is no unsuitable time for considering

the extent to which the fortunes of our British birds are influenced by our British system of game-preserving. Everybody knows that the chief business of the gamekeeper is to promote the well-being and increase the number of Pheasants, Partridges and Grouse, and to wage war upon certain *feræ naturæ* which are supposed to be prejudicial to their interests. Who does not know the "gamekeeper's museum" or "keeper's larder," which by its proportions attests his prowess with trap and gun? By the side of the plantation is a wooden framework, supporting five rails, placed one above the other and each nearly twenty yards in length. Hanging from these rails, is what we take at a distance to be a collection of tawny and parti-coloured rags. Draw nearer and one gets an unmistakable whiff of carrion, for upon the rails the remains of vermin, winged or four-footed, are nailed side by side as closely as they can be placed. There are whole regiments of stoats and weasels with their thin, dried-up bodies, rows of cats' tails and bunches of rats' tails, hedgehogs' heads, with here and there an owl, hawk or magpie, often the head only, time and the elements having dissipated the rest. For the collection has not been made in a day, but is the accumulation of years. Many of the specimens are very old, some of the weasels being only represented by their little white skulls, and weasels hold together for a long time. There are scores of rusty nails, from

which all trace of the victim has disappeared. By the side of a path just inside the wood are the bodies of defunct cats, dry and mummy-like. One seems to recognise on their faces the innocent expression of the hearth-rug pet, slain during her first stalk, and the scowl of the hardened offender who died fighting hard, with teeth and claws in full play. Some of these cats, the progeny in the second or third generation of house-tabbies which have taken to the woods, reach a great size and revert in colour and markings so completely to those characteristic of the true wild cat as often to be mistaken for that species. In every collection such as the one which we have described, will be found the weather-beaten remains of several carrion-crows, while blue-barred wings serve to identify the jays even in the last stage of dilapidation.

When game-preserving is carried on in the neighbourhood of wild hill-districts, there will probably be, in addition, the remains of ravens and buzzards. We shall rarely nowadays find the polecat, unless in Western Wales, where it is still common. Marten and wild cat (the genuine *Felis catus*) are not likely to fall into the hands of any but a Highland keeper, and so scarce have they become that he is now more disposed to forward them to a taxidermist than to nail them up. The first named are the ordinary victims which constitute the holocaust, the great

sacrifice at the altar of game-preserving. Sometimes a land-owner who is a fishing enthusiast will put a ban upon the Heron, with the result that it fills a space, by no means a small one, upon the wall of the kennels or upon the vermin rails.

Such, then, are the condemned. Now let us look into the counts of the indictment, for a first glance suggests that there may be degrees of guilt and in fact that the innocent, or relatively innocent, have in some cases suffered for the misdemeanours of villains of a much deeper dye. It must not be forgotten that the gamekeeper's motto is "when in doubt, kill," also that he is in no wise likely to give bird or beast credit for being better than it appears to be. Upon weasels and stoats one need waste no sentiment; they are notorious little cut-throats, though the weasel destroys a large number of field-mice, but one is sorry to see the hedgehog—quiet, inoffensive seeker of grubs and earth-worms in the twilight—in such company. Sad to say, the hedgehog's occasional lapses from the path of virtue are but too well attested, when temptation presents itself in the form of a partridges' nest or a young leveret hidden in the grass.

The Sparrow Hawk deserves no mercy, but how about the Kestrel? Its manner of hunting, examination of its castings, too, if further evidence be needed, proclaims it a destroyer of insects, chiefly beetles, and of small rodents. The gamekeeper, if pressed,

A BROOD OF YOUNG KESTRELS IN NEST.
Photo—J. T. Newman.

will admit at the last that he shoots it because it is a hawk, and will improvise a story of his having once seen a kestrel kill a young pheasant at the coops. So, for a crime as rare as it is ill-attested, the race must suffer. Upon the moors the Merlin is destroyed because of its fancied penchant for grouse chicks, though all observers agree that it preys, chiefly or entirely, upon the smaller moorland birds, pipits, twites and wheatears. But when we come to the Owls we have a still stronger case. Here upon the rails are the recognizable remains of sixty owls, five having been hanged within the week. There is something pitiable in seeing an owl, with its soft and downy plumage showing such exquisite gradations of colour, hanging, bedraggled by weather, until it becomes a mere scarecrow—a thing of shreds and patches. It is the pole-trap which has wrought this fatal havoc. In the middle of the straight ride which runs through the fir-plantation, an upright post bears upon its summit a toothed gin, like an ordinary rat-trap but round in outline. This narrow alley between the trees is a general highway. Every owl or hawk which skims along it will alight upon the post, the hawk to throw a keen glance around, the owl to listen for the least rustle or stir of mouse or shrew. Caught by the legs, they hang there, alive, sometimes for days. The employment of this instrument of torture is now prohibited by law, but it is doubtful

whether its use is more than checked. Upon the moors it not only catches the merlins for which it is intended, but cuckoos, nightjars and ring-ouzels fall victims as well. The harmlessness, not to say utility of the owl tribe, whether Barn, Tawny or Long-eared, is now so generally recognized that the game-keeper will usually tell us that he does not care about destroying them, but that he sets the traps for hawks and that the owls blunder into them. The result in either case is much the same.

Considering how long continued and systematic have been the efforts of gamekeepers as a body, it is remarkable how few species have disappeared from our avifauna. The fork-tailed kite, once the scavenger of the London streets, has gone. The buzzard has vanished from the lowlands, but it is still plentiful in the north and west. The blue-grey harrier is now rarely seen beating over fen or moorland. But the sparrow-hawk, though hard pressed, is nowhere exterminated, and, though the magpie has become a rare bird in some game-preserving districts, the numbers of the jay show little, if any, diminution, probably because its nest is not easily found, while the stick-built edifices of crow and magpie are so evident as to offer an easy means of destroying them at one particular time of year. But even in the lowlands there are estates which are not strictly preserved or outlying covers which are neglected. As we reach the

wilder hilly districts towards the Welsh border, or parts of the Midlands or North Country too industrial to allow of successful game-preserving, these predominate, and their overflow population restocks the low country with hawks and ground-vermin. Amongst the Welsh uplands the carrion-crow almost replaces the rook, and may be seen in bands thirty strong. It is a curious fact that round London and each of our large cities there is a zone in which pheasant-rearing is impossible, and where, in consequence, such birds as the crow, magpie, jay and brown-owl are particularly numerous. Only careful observers, who are early abroad, know what a large variety of birds finds shelter in the London parks.

From what has been said, it might be inferred that game-preserving fosters the favoured few at the expense of dealing death and destruction all around. This is far from being the case; with more justice it may be likened to the arm of the law which descends with crushing force on the evil-doer while promoting the happiness and security of the general public. Myriads of small birds, such as the various warblers, breed in safety in the game-covers, protected from intruders and from the attacks of their natural enemies. The mistle-thrush affords a case in point; it has greatly increased in numbers owing to its habit of nesting in the plantations. Comparison with the state of things which prevails upon the Continent brings

the conclusion that England is pre-eminently the country of small birds because nowhere else is game-preserving so general. Only let the latter be carried on with rather more discrimination and humanity, and every naturalist will express his indebtedness to the system.

CALENDAR FOR SEPTEMBER.

September 1st.—Young Greenfinches of late brood leave the nest.

,, 2nd.—Sand Martin still goes to its burrow.

,, 3rd.—Brood of young Moorhens not yet able to fly.

,, 4th.—Red-backed Shrike last noted.

,, 8th.—Blackcap and Garden Warbler last noted.

,, 9th.—Common Tern last noted.

,, 12th.—Corncrake last noted.

,, 14th.—Swift last noted (exceptionally late).

,, 16th.—Tree Pipit last noted.

,, 17th.—Skylark begins to sing again.

,, 18th.—Common Whitethroat last noted. Jack Snipe arrives.

,, 20th.—Song Thrush begins to sing again.

,, 22nd.—Spotted Flycatcher last noted.

,, 23rd.—Hedge Sparrow begins to sing again. Yellow Wagtail last noted.

,, 24th.—Young Barn Owls still in the nest.

September 25th.—Lesser Whitethroat and Turtle Dove last noted.

Willow Wren last heard.

,, 26th.—Common Sandpiper last noted.

A large arrival of Common Snipe.

,, 27th.—Whinchat last noted.

,, 28th.—Young House Martins still in the nest.

Whimbrel last heard.

,, 30th.—Sedge Warbler and Sand Martin last noted.

Bird Life in October

Bird Life in October

October is the mellow month of fruition, the kindly season when the promises of summer are redeemed in full. How lavishly it strews the ground with the ungarnered harvest of hedge-row and plantation, with horse-chestnut, beech-mast and acorns, tempting the squirrel to wander far from his accustomed woods into the open. Who does not know the misty morning which brightens into a typical day of October, perfectly still, with an almost imperceptible haze softening every feature of the landscape,—a day of St. Luke's summer, when the bird-cherry flames in the spinney amongst the yellow of birch and hazel, and the last chestnut-leaves fall silently? The genial warmth of mid-day brings out the bees and butterflies once more; drone-flies and blue-bottles cluster at the flowering ivy. The pheasants, which have wandered far from cover in search of acorns, lie dusting like fowls on a warm bankside. Under the oaks in the park two fallow stags fight, pushing one another backward with clashing of interlocked horns. Chaffinches sing blithely. Skylarks burst into song, but their flight is shorter and they do not mount so high as in spring.

But there comes a night of storm, sometimes a notable gale, which leaves its traces for years in the shape of jagged stumps and uprooted trees. At daybreak the Mistle Thrush flings a few wild strains from the topmost elm bough. Overhead, before the wind which scatters "the flying gold of the ruined woodlands," drift the first Redwings and Fieldfares, and the sportsman who is afoot betimes will find the first Woodcock at the usual spot in the dingle, where the hollies shelter the moist ground round the spring-head. Autumn has come in with "a noise of rooks," tumbled and flustered by gust and eddy. Such are two aspects of the month when summer and autumn overlap, for the redwings are sometimes here before the last swallows have departed. In chalk and limestone districts the land-drains, dry all the summer, now run again. "The autumn's leafy spoils lie strewn the forest glades along," giving to the air that ripe October flavour, as of leaf-mould in the making, which is characteristic of English woodlands and which we miss in drier climates. Now in copse and spinney the fungi are at their best; groups of white *agarics*, like delicate flowers on their slender stalks, cluster round the hazel-stools. The summer birds which have lingered latest now leave us, to be replaced by hardier invaders from over the northern sea. And our resident birds settle down into the mode of life which they will pursue through the winter, and

which is only interrupted by the contingency of a severe frost.

This settling into winter quarters involves, even in the case of our common resident birds, a large amount of movement about the country and change of haunt. It may be no more than a change from the woods to the lanes, as in the case of the Bullfinches which now leave the plantations and appear in the hedge-rows, their presence made known by a glimpse of white rumps disappearing into a thicket and by the low piping call-note which the bird-catcher can imitate so well.

The Golden Plover have left the moors to appear on sand-bars and tidal flats, and the blue-backed Merlin, which nested near them amongst the heather-knolls, also seeks the coast where it picks up many a wheatear or rock-pipit. The Sparrow Hawk, too, glides with straight and noiseless flight along the cliff-slope on the look-out for similar game. It is sometimes chivied and scolded by half-a-dozen wag-tails, just as, earlier on, the swallow's sharp "feet-a-feet" never fails to raise the alarm when the enemy is about. Chaffinches and Linnets now flock upon the stubbles and weedy fallows. The cock chaffinches seem slow to join these gatherings, wishing perhaps to enjoy a longer spell of freedom; at any rate so large a proportion of the flocks consists of hen-birds and young of the year as to have led Linnæus to apply the

rather fanciful term of *cælebs*, the bachelor, to our dapper and light-hearted finch. It by no means follows that all the chaffinches, yellow-hammers or skylarks which we see on the fields have been reared in our own particular neighbourhood, indeed they are often so numerous that this cannot possibly be the case. The tendency of almost all birds in seeking their winter quarters is to move south, be it only by a couple of degrees of latitude. One may even feel a doubt whether the robin which "eyes the delver's toil," ready to drop on to a worm or to sing perched on the handle of his spade if he leaves his work for a moment, is our own familiar robin which nested on a shelf of the garden tool-house. Some of our own thrushes are still with us, piping their rather inferior autumn song, but there are others which go about in small parties and whose want of familiarity with our shrubberies and shyness in venturing on to our lawns stamp them as aliens. At times we may surprise so many blackbirds in a hedge-row as to feel a moral certainty that they are a migratory party.

Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails continue to be on the move all through the month. Whether the various bands of roving free-booters are merely from the northern part of the kingdom or are invaders from over sea is not always easy to determine, but the voracious hordes of Wood Pigeons, which of late years have driven farmers to exasperated and organised reprisals,

are undoubtedly immigrants. Such unlikely birds even as Jays have been known to reach our shores in large numbers. The movement is in general terms from the north-east, for one must remember that the winter not only in Scandinavia but also in northern Germany is much more severe than our own.

A thick, close night without a moon, at any time after the twentieth of the month, never fails to bring a rush of migrants, and there is no more favourable locality for observing the phenomenon than the cliffs of the Yorkshire coast. All night long the light-house acts as a magnet. A crowd of feathered wayfarers emerges from the gloom to flutter moth-like in the dazzling rays, some to pass on, others to beat and buffet themselves against the glass. Wild-ducks have been known to come with such force as to crash right through it. Out of the darkness one hears on all sides the single "gluck" which is the call-note of the redwing. The first gleam of daylight shows that the skylarks are still coming in from the sea in thousands, and, as the sun breaks through the mist, goldcrests are seen swarming all over the cabbages in the light-house keeper's garden, tiny wanderers who have braved the North Sea passage of three hundred miles while one would suppose that a flight into the next parish represented the limit of their powers. A fisherman who is early astir finds a tired woodcock sheltering under the side of his boat; others have dropped into

all sorts of holes and crevices amongst the rocks. From amongst the bents and sand-grass just above the foreshore we put up a Short-eared Owl,—"woodcock owl" it is often called, for the two are fellow-travellers, and if the owl is noted the long-bills will not be far behind. The lighthouse keeper will tell us that next to the skylarks in point of numbers come the starlings. The two together constitute a large proportion of a basketful of dead or crippled birds which he picks up below the light in the morning. But in regular "migration weather," warm and foggy, birds often appear to lose their way, and anything may turn up. One Norfolk naturalist fell in with a whole flock of Bluethroats, and certain Lincolnshire ornithologists, who regularly work the fringe of thickets behind the foreshore or at the back of the dunes at migration time, know from experience that there is no rare warbler, European or even Asiatic, whose occurrence is beyond the bounds of possibility.

Rough weather with snow-squalls will, later on, bring the Snow Buntings, with a sprinkling of Shore Larks. A bird-catcher has been known to net sixty-four of the latter at a single haul upon Yarmouth denes. A heavy gale towards the end of the month causes various storm-driven wanderers to appear inshore, whereas in fine weather their path of southerly migration lies far out at sea. Sometimes from the harbour pier one may see a Storm Petrel flitting amongst the

crests of the waves. After such a night, when it has been blowing great guns, we have seen the Grey Phalaropes swimming amongst the tangle of drifted sea-wrack, paddling about like miniature ducks, though far more lightly and trim-built, long-winged and swift of flight as a plover.

Amongst the Kittiwakes, whose presence in the bay is always an indication of dirty weather outside, one may detect the rare and beautiful Sabine's Gull. We have known a west-coast bird-stuffer to have nearly a dozen of them through his hands in one week of wild autumn weather. Similar conditions sometimes bring a flight of the dark-plumaged robber-gulls known as Skuas, which make their living by forcing the true gulls to disgorge their finny spoil.

A keen October morning which has opened with a white frost is always associated with the "shack, shack, shack" of the first Fieldfares as they pass overhead or rise from the meadows as their sentinels in the tree-tops shriek a chattering alarm. At the sound how memory reverts to their summer haunts amongst the birch-woods which fringe the Norwegian fjords. Wary birds are the blue-backed "felts," first object of pursuit of many a youthful gunner. Rarely does the stalk under cover of the well-berried hawthorn hedge prove successful; snow, frost and scanty fare must tame their spirits before they will allow of a sufficiently near approach. The smaller

thrushes which so often bear them company, showing foxy-red sides and a white streak above the eye, are Redwings which, like the fieldfare, have exchanged the long sunny nights of the northern summer for our murky winter, still, in spite of its drawbacks, more kindly than their own. Under the beeches Chaffinches peck at the kernels of the fallen "mast." A harsher note, "kek, kek," tells that there are other finches with them, and with the binoculars one soon picks out the orange shoulder-patches, buff breast and white rump of a cock Brambling. Further examination shows that the northerners form no small proportion of the flock, and this is always the case when there is a heavy fall of beech-mast, though we see few bramblings in the alternate years when the beeches do not fruit.

In the third week of the month Hooded Crows begin to arrive on the East Coast, coming in in small parties with easy and leisurely flight. Called "grey crows" from their ash-coloured mantles, they are familiar enough all through the winter upon rocky shores where they feed upon shell-fish at low tide. Less numerous inland, they there prefer the neighbourhood of kennels or the mud-flats of tidal rivers and are always ready to pounce upon a wounded bird which has escaped the gunner.

It is not every winter that we shall see a bird whose plumage of white, black and pearl-grey suggests at first view a small magpie, but whose lively movements

as it flutters down the hedge and flirts its tail on alighting at once shows its kinship to the more familiar butcher-bird. Some years, however, there is quite an immigration of Grey Shrikes, and the chance of meeting with one, especially in the north of England, is far from remote.

October brings in larger numbers another acquaintance whose appearance was noted last month, to wit the Jack Snipe. Winter after winter the little patch of bog at the overflow of the pool never fails to harbour its jack-snipe, which, after lying like a stone while the retriever is scenting about close to it, starts up, when least expected, with weak, wavering flight, and, after flying for about twenty yards, pitches again into cover.

This month sees further arrivals of the "flight" ducks which come from the north to join the mallard and teal which have passed the summer with us. By the middle of the month the drake Mallards have lost the plumage in which they so closely resemble their mates and are once more in full dress. To various parts of the coast come the diving-ducks, Scaup, Golden-eye, Pochard and Scoter, which spend the winter chiefly upon the sea or upon tidal waters, obtaining their food, whether shell-fish or vegetable matter, by the method which earns for them the above appellation. The waders, from the curlew down to dunlin and stint, have received further accession to their numbers, and give to sand-bars and mud-flats an important element in

their winter bird-population, ready to share with us all the hazard of winter and rough weather unless an exceptionally severe spell of frost should send them still further south.

SEED-TIME AND HARVEST.

As the autumn runs its course, a hundred crops are garnered which do not affect the world's food supply, and regarding which no reports emanate from Mark Lane. Furred and feathered harvesters alike are keenly alive to the fact that this is the time of year of the ripening and perfection of grain and seed, nut and berry—of crops which are all their own to garner or to glean. The birds have naught to think of but the moment's employment of this "feast of fat things," but the small rodents, squirrel, vole and field-mouse, have in addition to make provision for a time of sleep or of drowsy inactivity. From a hole in a sandy bank beside a field-path protrude some ends of straw which a dog has uncovered in scratching. On opening up the miniature granary, it is found to contain just over two hundred ears of corn, each neatly cut off close to the top of the stalk. The proprietor, whose "best laid schemes" have thus gone "agley," is no doubt a short-tailed field-vole. The same little animal, or possibly a long-tailed field-mouse, has filled this old blackbirds' nest full of alder-cones and seeds,

and has stored this double handful of haw-stones in a crevice of the limestone rock.

A fruitful autumn is hailed as making all the difference between plenty and want. Note the riotous rejoicing of rooks, jays, pheasants, wood-pigeons when there is a heavy fall of acorns and beech-mast. And in addition to these larger fowl, which bolt them whole or in good-sized fragments until their crops are round and firm as a cricket ball, acorn and beech-nut afford entertainment for weeks to chaffinches and bramblings, great and coal-tits, which peck and hammer chippings from them in a more retail manner. Look further at all the lavish profusion of the hedgerows in a kindly season, at bryonies white and black, cornel, buckthorn, privet and guelder-rose. One of the beauties of a fine and warm autumn is that, the wood of tree and shrub being well ripened, we are sure next spring of a profusion of blossom, first and foremost requisite for an abundance of hedge-fruit later in the year. Much must of course depend upon the state of the weather at the time of flowering, for, by no possible understanding of the law of cause and effect are we able to see in a plentiful supply of berries an anticipation of the needs of the birds during a severe winter to follow.

It is evident that some of the hedge-fruits are not favourites with the birds ; these are probably unpalatable or actually unwholesome. The coral ropes of

the black-bryony and the crimson egg-shaped droplets of guelder-rose and woody-nightshade remain untouched; honeysuckle berries appear to be little noticed and for sloes there is no demand. On the other hand how generally popular are the "haws" of the whitethorn and the "hips" of the dog-rose. The thrushes and blackbirds, having stripped the mountain ash, betake themselves to the elders, apparently because this crop, which comes next in season, is but a fleeting one. When the black, wine-juiced clusters are thinned, the haws remain as a stand-by for the greater part of the winter, with the possibility of resorting to holly and yew berries in time of scarcity. If the winter is mild and open, so that worms and insects are obtainable throughout, the berries are neglected, but, if recourse is had to them, we think that haws are preferred to yew and holly-berries, and with good reason, if one may judge from personal experiment. But the nuthatch when not pressed as to choice will take yew-berries, and the wood-pigeon will fill its crop with holly-berries when haws are equally available. But then nothing in the form of grain, green crops or berries appears to come amiss to this voracious feeder, which is even said to grub up and eat the tuber-like roots of the lesser celandine. After the bean-harvest, too, the scattered pods left upon the ground burst and afford grand entertainment to pigeons and rooks.

GROUP OF BLACK-HEADED GULLS.

Photo—W. Bickerton.

How many specific predilections and traits are exhibited by birds in their mode of feeding. This is well shown in the case of the Chaffinch and the Bullfinch. While the chaffinch spends much of his time upon the ground, searching for the seeds of small cornfield weeds, the bullfinch is much more strictly arboreal. It seldom joins the other finches upon the stubbles, but finds most of its food in the hedge-rows, though it will sometimes drop down to the thistle-heads, or to any seeding herbaceous plants, such as the willow-herb and nettle, which run to about the same height. Thus we have noted as included in its *menu* the seeds of the dandelion and sorrel, the seeds from the "keys" of the ash and the winged seeds of the birch. It also takes the clematis seeds, nipping off the feathery appendage, and is particularly fond of privet-berries. The Goldfinch's proclivities, as is well known, lie in the direction of the thistle with all its kin, such as ragwort, knapweed and teasel, while the Linnet's services in connection with such cruciferous weeds as the charlock and shepherd's purse need scarcely to be mentioned. The strong-billed Hawfinch, on the other hand, need be looked for neither in field nor hedge-row. Its special taste is for the nutlets of the hornbeam and it is consequently a bird of woods and plantations, to be met with wherever that tree occurs in any quantity. This is particularly the case in the Home Counties, as

in Epping Forest, parts of Hertfordshire and in fact as near London as Hampstead and Highgate. In all this district the hawfinch is an abundant though, on account of its shyness, not a familiar bird.

Even two such nearly-allied species as the Ring Dove and the Stock Dove are far from being identical in their tastes. We had the opportunity of noting that the parties of pigeons which came daily to the borders of a Midland reservoir to feed on the seeds of water-plants consisted solely of stock-doves, and those who have waited with a gun for pigeons to come in to a plantation to roost report that the stock-doves, coming from their own particular foraging expeditions, arrive separately from the ring-doves. The Turtle Dove clears off a great number of seeds of weeds, such as those of the corn-spurrey, from the fallows and stubbles, and when the Sand Grouse, those rare wanderers from the steppes of the Caspian, visited us in 1888 they showed the same taste.

The tits, a highly versatile family, are all but omnivorous. The Blue Tit will peck the "eye," the softer part at the more pointed end, out of the grains of Indian corn, while we have frequently seen the Marsh Tit at the sunflower seeds. The Great Tit has a liking for the neighbourhood of the kennels where the game-keeper has hung up meat for his dogs, and a dark whisper attaches to it the stigma of cannibalism.

Certain it is that it has been seen to hammer in the skulls of small and defenceless birds, and to make a *bonne bouche* of their brains. Some bird, probably a tit, pecks open the oak-apple galls, to obtain the fat white grub which occupies the central cavity. Here, then, is a small problem which suggests others.

Does the Cuckoo suck eggs? We believe the well-known lines

> The cuckoo is a merry bird ; he sings as he flies,
> He brings us good tidings and tells us no lies,
> He sucks little birds' eggs to make his voice clear,
> He only sings " cuckoo " three months in the year.

contain an unjustified aspersion. The cuckoo's diet consists largely of caterpillars, chiefly hairy ones, such as those of the oak-eggar and fox-moth. Should not the responsibility for the sucked eggs which one finds, sometimes so neatly emptied that they will pass muster in a collection, be laid at the door of the jay or magpie? The keeper's regular bait for a jay, when he arranges a few upright sticks to support a little platform of sods which contains a well-hidden trap, is a thrush's egg. Nothing, too, is more fatal to the magpie than a hen's egg into which a few grains of strychnine have been introduced, but it must be partially hidden ; if too evident, it will excite suspicion.

Then there is the matter of the Dipper or Water Ouzel, whose food, it is more than hinted, includes trout-spawn amongst other items, so that upon some carefully preserved waters it is shot off. When one has the rare opportunity of looking down upon a dipper at work at the bottom of a pool, it is seen to maintain itself there by vigorous movement of its wings as it searches the bed of pebbles or gravel. It may safely be surmised that the pursuit of water insects and their larvæ is its primary object; possibly some small amount of spawn may be disturbed or even eaten.

Even the diet of the birds of prey may be more varied than one ordinarily supposes. The Buzzard, though a noble-looking hawk, does not disdain earthworms and beetles. A farmer remarked to us that a pair of buzzards, which nested on the rocks above his house, had entirely cleared his fields of moles. A friend, holiday-making in Wales, saw a buzzard rise from the bushy cliff-slope with a writhing snake hanging from its talons, and a gentleman who inadvertently wounded a female Brown Owl, and turned her into an old pheasantry to recover, tells us that her disconsolate mate nightly brought, not only mice and birds, but also numerous frogs and toads. But a general discussion of so large a subject as the food of birds would lead us too far from the berried hedges of October.

CALENDAR FOR OCTOBER.

October 1st.—Hedge Sparrow sings.
,, 2nd.—Pheasants wander in search of acorns.
,, 4th.—Twites or Mountain Linnets flock.
,, 5th.—Tree Creeper sings.
,, 7th.—Skylark sings.
,, 10th.—Cirl Bunting sings.
,, 11th.—Cuckoo (young) last seen.
,, 12th.—Chiffchaff last heard.
,, 15th.—Swallow last seen (average).
,, 16th.—Chiffchaff last noted.
,, 17th.—Hooded Crow arrives.
,, 18th.—Wheatear last noted.
,, 19th.—Redwing arrives.
,, 20th.—Young Wood Pigeons still in the nest.
,, 22nd.—Brambling or Mountain Finch arrives.
,, 23rd.—Grey Shrike seen.
Thrushes heard on migration at night.
,, 25th.—Fieldfare arrives.
House Martin last seen.
,, 26th.—Woodcock arrives.
Black Redstart seen.
,, 28th.—Migratory party of Blackbirds seen.
,, 30th.—Short-eared Owl arrives.
,, 31st.—Bullfinches begin to appear in the lanes and hedges.

Bird Life in November

Bird Life in November

NOVEMBER perhaps of all the months holds the lowest place in popular esteem. In cities and large towns it often presents itself under an aspect so depressing as to defy all attempts at palliation, and even in the country it must be admitted that a large proportion of the dark and dismal days which lead up to Christmas fall within the compass of its last three weeks. There are days when all the daylight seems to die out of the damp-laden atmosphere before the afternoon is half spent,—when in the sodden, dripping woods all is silent, as if the birds were afraid of their own voices. But let us not forget how, earlier in the month, St. Martin never fails to bring us a day or two, sometimes a whole fortnight, when it is summer again for the few sunlit hours on either side of mid-day, when the flies still bask against a sunny wall and hive-bees visit the ivy-blossom for their last scanty potations of the year.

After the frost of early morning the ash-leaves fall silently, unchanged in colour and unstirred by the least breath of wind. As the sun gets through, robins pipe cheerfully from the hedges, and skylarks trill,

as they chase one another above the fresh-turned furrows, till we momentarily expect them to break into song. Belated visitors to the coast may enjoy days such as the August crowd sighed for in vain, halcyon days of kindly skies and placid sea, when knots of gulls scream above the shoals of fry, or float lazily up the estuary with the tide. Over field and woodland the glamour of departed glories is cast once more, till, with oncoming dusk, the partridges crow from the stubbles, and the pheasants, with tumult of wings and voices, fly up into the oaks to roost. As we stand by the lake-side, the last gleam of daylight is reflected from the silky breasts and necks of a pair of Crested Grebes, while, nearer the margin, many a waterhen splashes a silvery track amongst the darkening shadows. Magpies noisily go to roost in the plantation, and in the shrubbery the blackbird "chink, chink"s his vesper hymn. A familiar sight in many parts of the country is that of a vast flock of Starlings, manœuvring, like a drifting cloud of smoke, as they seek some well-known resort to roost in company. With what exactitude the flock wheels as one bird, changing in a moment from closed formation to extended front, and finally dropping like a stone to the plantation or reed-bed which is their nightly haunt. Not less wonderful is the well-drilled precision with which the lapwings carry out their evolutions in lines and squadrons, and, familiar as it is, the spiral circling

of a flock of rooks is no less a marvel of concerted wingmanship.

November is in truth a medley of all the seasons. The illusion of the few all-but-summer days with which the month enters is sometimes heightened by the sight of a belated Swallow. These November swallows are as a rule young birds of late broods. Not strong enough upon the wing to leave with their fellows, they linger with us until cut off by the first sharp touch of frost. Later in the month, when the bulbs send up green, pointed wedges to break ground, when silvery-white willow-catkins push back the bud-scales, and when primroses and violets flower in sheltered nooks, the time of the year might almost be early spring. But these tentative and premature awakenings are not seldom discouraged before the month is out by a sharp reminder that the winter is still before us.

However, if open weather continues, there is, in November's closing days, a fresh and louder-voiced element of hopefulness in the thrush's song, which tells of faith that the turn of year is not far distant. The mistle-thrush, too, sings more frequently, and now and again a tit may be heard practising its spring note. At the beginning of the month the chaffinch ceases his autumn song—but a poor affair at the best—but the robin and wren, and, in districts where it is found, the woodlark, do not fail us. But there

seems at times a strain of pensive sadness in the Robin's song, in keeping with "the melancholy days, the saddest of the year." The questioning pose of its head, as it regards us with bright, full eye, seems to speak an intelligence beyond that of most feathered things, so may the robin not possess a soul attuned to nature's moods? On foggy mornings the hedge-sparrow sings, and the goldcrest's note calls attention to its tiny personality as it darts into the air to catch gnats, or explores in search of spiders the inmost recesses of a furze-bush, all gemmed with dewy gossamers. A peculiarity of the goldcrest, which it shares with one or two others of the very smallest birds, as the tree creeper and coal-tit, is that at times it seems absolutely indifferent to one's presence, so that it may be watched from a distance of three feet. Whether it is pre-occupation, or a faith that the observer, like the law, *de minimis non curat*, certain it is that a coal-tit busily hammering at an acorn, or a tree-creeper running up an old mossy wall, has more than once allowed us to come so near that we could all but touch it. These small birds seem to spend a large part of the winter in ranging the woods in company. One may pursue the forest path for half an hour, hearing no sound but that made by the few leaves still upon the trees tap-tapping in readiness to join the drifted ranks of those which have fallen, and seeing no living thing but a squirrel which sits with paws folded over

a comfortably filled vest, then rushes up a spruce with rattling of bark, flicks its tail half a dozen times in defiance, and anon nibbles as it watches us with black eyes and mobile nose. Now the low piping of hidden bullfinches is heard, and a distant jay squalls in obtrusive advertisement of his presence. But suddenly, a moment later, the trees are alive with small birds. A whole party of long-tailed tits is jerking with short, restless flights from branch to branch. Coal-tits and blue-tits perform acrobatic feats on the finer twigs. Several goldcrests are of the company, while two or three tree-creepers devote their attention to the trunks and larger limbs, always beginning to investigate a tree at its base and dodging artfully to keep branch or stem between themselves and the observer. In a few minutes all have passed on and the wood seems more silent than before. Whether pure sociability or a feeling that there is safety in numbers is the motive which leads to these associations, we cannot say, but they are constantly to be met with, and the units of which the foraging party is composed are almost always the same. Possibly a nuthatch may make one of the coterie, creeping about the oak-boles, head downwards as usual, or bolder movements and a stronger note than those of the small fry betray the great-tit.

On a dull day when the light is bad, any trick of manner or movement is a help towards identifying

these woodland birds. Thus the jay is known by its manner of going up a tree by taking long hops from branch to branch; a blackbird, glimpsed in fading light, can be nothing else if it gives its tail a sharp, upward jerk as it alights. Just as characteristic is the shuffling movement of the hedge-sparrow's wings as it shows itself upon the outside of the hedge. But there is a less familiar note—a plaintive "see-see-se-ep," from the tops of the beeches, which are still splashed with fiery yellow and ruddy gold where sheltered from the November gales. As the bird flies we know the Hawfinch by its stumpy figure and undulating flight, which almost gives the impression that its big beak makes it top-heavy. And once in a way, generally where there is a group of firs, we may chance upon a party of finch-like birds, whose call-note and general appearance at once stamp them as something out of the common. The glass shows that the plumage of some is chiefly dull crimson, while in that of others greenish-yellow predominates, also that they cling to the branches in curious parrot-like attitudes, as, with a slight wrench or twist, they detach the seeds from between the scales of the cones. Such are the Crossbills, well called "gipsy-migrants," for they appear to wander about the country in haphazard fashion, sometimes spending a day or two in some familiar grove of firs where we have never seen them before, and where we may not see them again for

twenty years. They breed, often quite early in the year in February or March, wherever they may happen to be when they feel the impulse to do so, and thus lead a free Bohemian existence which brings them but rarely within the ken of the south-country naturalist, though further afield, in the old pine-woods of the Grampians, they are always to be met with.

About the fields and lanes the varied tribes of finches and buntings now appear to be the all-prevailing birds. One notes with pleasure the extent to which the Goldfinch has benefited from protective legislation. The "charms" of goldfinches which are to be seen about overgrown fallows and weedy field-borders, are far more numerous and stronger in point of numbers than was the case twenty years ago. And wherever there is arable land how thickly chaffinches and yellow-hammers people the hedge-rows. If a census of the feathered tribes of the British Isles could be taken, one or the other would, we feel sure, easily distance all competitors, not excepting the house-sparrow. For while the sparrow is a hanger-on to civilisation, and is quite rare in some districts, as amongst the Welsh uplands, finch and bunting are everywhere. Coming from a party of the latter, one may hear on a bright day in November what sounds like a variant of the yellow-hammer's refrain, but a nearer approach shows that the author is a Cirl Bunting, who shows his black throat as he puts up his head to

sing, relapsing after each effort into the listless attitude so characteristic of all his kin.

Judging from the scattered feathers which mark the sparrow-hawk's "kill," the chaffinch is its most frequent victim, but that it will attempt larger game the well-picked remains of a wood-pigeon not seldom indicate. This is no doubt the work of the hen sparrow-hawk—a much larger and bolder bird than her mate, to whose powers the blackbird forms a more appropriate prey. No other of our raptorial birds is possessed by such a blind ferocity. We have known the sparrow-hawk frequently to dash against the wires of an out-door aviary in the attempt to seize a singing-bird, and for the same purpose it will sometimes enter a room, or stun itself against a window-pane in trying to do so. In one instance of which we knew, a sparrow-hawk, not content with killing two parent blackbirds at the nest, returned and took the unfledged young. It probably had a brood to satisfy, and for the wants of such the sparrow-hawk is known to cater with a liberal hand.

Along the brook-side, where we have watched the water-rat on the feed at dusk, and have seen the water-shrews playing about like miniature otters, all the gay tangle of summer, creamy meadow-sweet, purple loosestrife and yellow flag, is now sere and dead. As a Kingfisher darts past, its azure-blue back looks all the more brilliant by contrast with such lifeless

A SITTING WOODCOCK.

Photo—Herbert Lazenby.

surroundings. Alighting on the top of a stake, it drops into the water with an audible plunge to seize a minnow. The yellow breast of a Grey Wagtail, wading daintily amongst the cresses, makes another spot of colour. With harsh "giach, giach," a Snipe rises from a patch of rushes. Lower down, before it enters the pool, the stream loses itself for a time in a small boggy copse, where the alders stand amongst miry pools, upon whose borders earlier in the year marsh-marigolds—the king-cups of our childhood's days—shine like fire. There are small birds in the tops of the alders, clinging tit-like as they extract the seed from the cones, the process causing a tiny rattling noise, just loud enough to be heard. But they are not tits, for the glass shows here the gold-banded wing and green breast of a cock Siskin, and there the crimson-dyed frontlet of a Redpoll. Mixed bands of these two small finches may always be seen at this time of the year amongst the alders and birches, which they only desert when the seed has fallen; and a few minutes spent in watching their active and lively proceedings will not be thrown away.

By the end of November the arrival of northern birds is practically completed. Visitors to the south coast may sometimes see the Black Redstart, which every autumn arrives in small numbers from the Continent to spend the winter in sunny nooks amongst the cliffs of Cornwall and South Devon, though it is

also fond of catching flies against the warm sides or upon the sloping roofs of large buildings. When first seen it gives the impression of being one of the summer birds which has failed to migrate with the rest; a second glance shows that it is a redstart, greyer and darker in plumage than the "firetail," for whose arrival we watch in spring.

THE HOME OF A NATURALIST.

Who is there that takes a pleasure in fresh-turned earth and leafing woods, and in all furred and feathered things which disport themselves therein, but will be ready to honour the pious memory of old Gilbert White, arch-priest of the cult of the field-naturalist, and founder of his craft? No doubt, as there were mighty men before Agamemnon, so there must have been yet earlier votaries of nature who strolled by quiet ways, with quick eye and listening ear, but they passed away, mute, inglorious, because they did not, like the sage of Selborne, commit their observations to writing. And probably he, as he penned that long series of letters to his faithful correspondents, Mr. Pennant and the Honourable Daines Barrington, had little idea of the possibility of their ever appearing in print. Hence, in part, their easy, simple flow, without pose or affectation, no small advantage attaching to the epistolary style. And what a far away eighteenth

century atmosphere one breathes in these letters, which cover a period roughly of thirty years, from 1760 to 1790—the time of wigs, cocked hats, short breeches and knee-buckles. While a famous divine made the world his parish, White made his parish his world. But for rare visits to Oxford, and at long intervals journeys into Sussex in a post-chaise, he passed his days at Selborne, type of those whose every care a few paternal acres bound, proto-type of the stay-at-home naturalist, who cares not to roam, because within a mile of home he can find enough of interest to fill a lifetime. What need of Alps with the South Downs at hand, of lakes when he had Frensham Pool ? As the years ran on, everything upon which he set eyes surrounded him with the friendships of a lifetime, and each year eclipsed in interest the last, as he accumulated fresh material for his calendar of the seasons, and worked out in fuller detail the natural history of his loved parish. He was unmarried, and his only occupation appears to have been that of a curious enquirer into nature's ways and special reporter to the seasons, —a life of perfect leisure, yet never dull, how far apart from the strivings of this frenzied age, hermit-like in its aloofness from the stir of cities, remote as ruffs and farthingales, irrecoverable as the dodo. How the mellow warmth of by-gone summers seems to cling to these pages—the memory of leisurely tea-drinkings on the lawn, prolonged till the nightjar droned from

the Hanger. We doubt whether White felt much interest in the news-letter when it reached him; no topic which it touched upon could be so important as a rumoured discovery of hibernating swallows in the next parish. How mild, too, his ambitions—that the "falco" which he sends up to the authorities to be named may turn out to be a new species,—that his friends may find something of interest in the basket of fresh-water fishlets from Selborne's brook, which he despatches by the London coach neatly packed in water-weeds. With what modest, yet honest pride, too, he describes his new "locustella, or grasshopper lark." For those were the palmy days when even a stay-at-home naturalist might aspire to add his quota to the British fauna.

It is a fine morning in November as we leave the train at Liss, on the South-Western line, and make enquiries as to the way to Selborne. After walking for perhaps three-quarters of an hour, we approach a fine, bold-looking hill, whose steep, chalky side has been a landmark all the way. With the exception of this precipitous south-eastern face, it is covered with beech-trees, giving an example of the hanging woods, or "hangers," so characteristic of the district. On enquiry of a labourer, this proves to be Nore Hill, "that noble chalk promontory," as White calls it, "remarkable for sending forth two streams into two different seas." A number of wood-pigeons, flying

from the tree-tops, show as moving specks of bluish grey against the dark, coppery background of the beeches. The trees are well-grown, shapely specimens, recalling the eulogy of White on this "the most lovely of all forest trees, whether we consider its smooth rind or bark, its glossy foliage, or graceful pendulous boughs." Following a sort of track along the top of the hill, and down its further side, the corner of Selborne Hanger appears, and a few of the houses of the village, some half a mile away. At the entrance to the village a spring gushes out, which it is easy to recognise as the old Well-head, "that fine perennial fount, little influenced by drought or wet seasons," now metamorphosed into a handsome brass fountain with a trough at which the villagers may fill their pails. The single street, of which the hamlet consists, straggles for perhaps half a mile north-west from this point, the church and more interesting part, so far as we are concerned, lying at its further extremity. The cottages are with scarcely an exception of a very humble order, and the sights and sounds are those of a thousand other English villages—the inn, with its swinging sign and the waggoner's team halting in the road before it, the fold-yard, where the cattle stand knee-deep in straw, the smithy under whose porch, curiously supported by three pollard lime-trees, the sparks are flying, the village shop, which seems to sell everything from biscuits to boot-laces, and lastly the modest school-house,

whence we may hope sufficient light has emanated to make certain practices pursued by the rude forefathers of the hamlet, and described by White, long since things of the past.

At the end of the street we come suddenly upon a square space of no great extent, round which the interest of the village to most visitors doubtless, as to ourselves, centres. It is the Plestor, about which antiquarians have had so much to say in the various editions of the Natural History of Selborne, gathering-place of the rustics, perhaps from Saxon times. In the middle of it is a sycamore of no great size, the successor of "the vast oak, the delight of young and old," which stood here till "the amazing tempest of 1703 overturned it at once to the infinite regret of the inhabitants." That long and rather irregularly-built house, facing the road upon the south side of the Plestor, we have no difficulty in recognizing, in spite of its new red-brick front, as "the Wakes," formerly the home of the naturalist. Though partly rebuilt, its look of old-fashioned comfort and quiet prosperity has not been disturbed. To the right is the high wall of the kitchen garden, which restricted the wanderings of Timothy the tortoise, till one sunny morning "he found the wicket open, eluded the vigilance of the gardener, and escaped into the sainfoin, and thence into the beans." No doubt this is the wall which in 1773 produced "ten dozen lovely peaches and nectarines." Turning

now to the other end of the Plestor, we enter the churchyard and stop to admire the fine yew, said to be second in size only to one other in England. Compared with the date when it was a slender stripling, White's time seems modern indeed. A pair of nuthatches has adapted one of the holes in its venerable trunk to nesting purposes. No doubt White often stood in its shade to watch the swifts darting into their holes in the church tower, or the white-owl bringing mice to her young ones under the eaves. His grave within the church was unmarked except by his initials, and date, 26th June, 1793.

We now turn our steps towards the Hanger, that " vast hill of chalk rising three hundred feet above the village." The beeches with which it is covered are tall and slender, owing to their growing so closely together. It was here that a boy climbed one of them " though standing on so steep and dizzy a situation " to plunder the honey-buzzards' nest. A large part of the wood has been cleared from the top of the Hanger, the trees having appparently fallen before some south-west gale. The little summer-house where White and his friends used to come to take tea on fine summer evenings, when on one occasion a nightjar, perching on the roof to " churr," caused the whole structure to vibrate, must have been somewhere hereabouts, perhaps at the spot where the trees have been removed to allow us to catch sight of the village below. From this point

we can see the garden of "the Wakes," and the paddock or park-like meadow behind it, also the south side of the house. Descending by the slippery chalk path called "the zig-zag," which was made in White's time, the hour or more which remains is spent in a stroll to Woolmer, where we hope to see something of the Forest so often mentioned by White. The road is one of the two "rocky, hollow lanes" referred to by him as being amongst the singularities of Selborne, the other, to Alton, being now disused. On each side are high banks of loose, white freestone, amongst which the ivy and the roots of trees twist curiously about and the fronds of the polypody and shield-fern fill every little hollow formed by the overhanging bank. Presently the "forest," so-called, comes in sight, a bare, heathery waste, stretching away towards Hindhead, and much modified, we believe, since the date of our visit by its adaptation to the purposes of military training. Some of its large ponds or meres, to which ospreys, long-legged stilt-plovers, and other rarities used to come, are drained; others still remain. A walk of five miles to Alton concludes our pilgrimage. In the fields are great piles of hop-poles, ready for use again next season. The poor people still, as in White's time, "enjoy a second harvest in September by hop-picking."

White was the first of that school of British out-door naturalists who, as close observers of birds and their

ways, have not been surpassed, or indeed equalled, by those of any other nation. For this painstaking and sympathetic study of birds in the field, as distinct from the work of the museum or closet-naturalist, may almost be called a speciality of the Anglo-Saxon race, including in that term its transatlantic off-shoot, and is merely one manifestation of that kindly tolerance and friendly intimacy with animated things which characterises the Teutonic spirit at its best, and which is noticeably lacking among the Latin peoples. A hopeful sign of the times to the well-wishers of our native fauna is that this spirit steadily broadens and deepens. Whether it is that the destructive spirit derived from savage ancestors asserts itself less strongly in each succeeding generation, or that sport necessarily becomes increasingly the pastime of the few, certain it is that the tendency of the naturalist nowadays is to take the field armed with binoculars or camera, rather than with breech-loader—a state of things which would have rejoiced the heart of White, and which, to the birds themselves, must seem to bring the millennium notably nearer.

CALENDAR FOR NOVEMBER.

Nov. 1st.—Bullfinches more numerous in the lanes.
,, 2nd.—Ring Ouzel last noted.
,, 3rd.—Chaffinch still sings.
,, 4th.—Migratory party of Pied Wagtails seen.

Nov. 8th.—Cirl Bunting sings.
,, 9th.—Woodlark sings.
,, 10th.—Rooks resort to their nesting trees.
,, 11th.—Hedge Sparrow sings.
,, 12th.—Swallow last seen (exceptional).
,, 13th.—Mistle Thrushes flock in company with Fieldfares.
,, 14th.—Skylarks sing freely.
,, 15th.—Black Redstart seen.
,, 19th.—Cold inland drives Golden Plover to the coast.
,, 20th.—Bramblings at beech-mast.
,, 21st.—Large party of Meadow Pipits seen.
,, 22nd.—Nuthatch takes yew-berries.
,, 25th.—Tree Creeper sings.
,, 27th.—Mistle Thrush sings.
,, 29th.—Song Thrushes sing more freely
,, 30th.—Wren sings.

Bird Life in December

Bird Life in December

In spite of short, dark days, it is impossible to take seriously December's claim to be a winter month. "Old-fashioned winters," if they ever existed, waned with the stage-coach and went out finally with Dickens. For every Christmas upon which frost and snow bestow their traditional benison a dozen are celebrated to the accompaniment of drizzle and mud. Your modern December is, in fact as by the calendar, but a continuation of autumn; winter but toys playfully with the nut-brown damsel; if snow and ice appear it is but for short rehearsals, any serious call upon these scenic effects being reserved for the new year. So well is this recognized that those who are curious in meteorological matters point here and there to a Christmas Day, which was actually warmer than the following twenty-fifth of May, while no jury of youthful Britons would acquit the month of a peculiar aptitude for raising hopes of hyperborean sport only to be dissipated as soon as the skates appear and the first snowball is thrown. In an average December flowers of a dozen kinds,—monthly roses, stocks, chrysanthemums, linger on in the cottage gardens. The small bat or

pipistrelle is out on mild evenings almost up to Christmas time, and memory recalls at least one December butterfly. In the middle of the month the honeysuckle begins to show its new leaves, and the gorse, in the kindly climate of the west, breaks into a thousand points of colour upon the bank where the rabbits sit out, basking in the pale sunshine of the closing year.

For "there are sunny days in winter after all," days which come after rain and storm, when the level beams strike on the ruddy trunks of the Scotch firs, and brighten the hues of the dying bracken. There are blue skies to light up the berried hollies, the red twigs of the cornel, the spindle-tree's rosy fruit bursting to show the orange-coated seed. And December's sunsets,—the flying storm-rack rent to show the flaming west, the deep orange afterglow which means frost—will vie with those of any month in the year. Few are the days when the naturalist in ordinary health will fail to be abroad to taste the brisk air after the morning's touch of frost, to see the leafless trees once more displaying their symmetry of limb and twig, and to note in the hedges, still hoary with masses of feathery-seeded clematis, the empty nests of the warblers, once so deep in tangled greenery and now so plain to view. A short "nip" of frost, lasting three or four days, has scarcely time to harden the surface of the ground before the wind veers to the west and all is soft again.

Wintry "alarms and excursions" of this kind keep many birds upon the move, but do not drive them far afield, or cause them real inconvenience. Ground-feeding birds have seldom in December to contend with the iron-bound crust or long-lying snow which may come later. When the frost begins to "give," the thrushes tunefully hail the return of easier times, and the robins warble snatches of song, low and soft, as if the thaw had brought it with some suggestion of spring.

Fresh-turned earth means a plentiful food-supply, not only to rook and jackdaw but to a host of others. This is well seen in the neighbourhood of the coast, where the gulls at this time of year keep up a constant sailing over the land to find out where ploughing is going on. Fieldfares are scattered over one of the low-lying meadows where fresh-made hillocks show that the soil is still sufficiently friable for the mole to be at work. Suddenly a wheeling squadron of Starlings deploys into foraging formation and drops down to join them. Then may be seen a curious difference in manner of feeding. The fieldfare is the embodiment of vigilance,—a hop, a cautious look round, a hurried peck, then again on the *qui vive*. Meanwhile the starlings race hither and thither, run together into little knots upon the least suspicion that a neighbour has made a find, and dispute noisily, while those in the rear continually fly over the heads of the others

to take front rank. Every bird is keen on pushing his own business and in such a hurry that manners have to go. In the midst of their quarrelling they suddenly dart into the air, and begin frantically manœuvring, then fall as if shot, striking the ground with a thud. Just as they do this, a sparrow-hawk dashes through their ranks, and, without checking its flight, goes off with one of their number.

A wet December, when the streams run bank-high, floods the river-flats and forms wide, shallow plashes beloved of the Lapwings and equally attractive to wandering gulls and wading-birds of all sorts. A tall, moody-looking Heron comes to see whether the newly-discovered lakelet affords scope for his piscatorial craft. Such Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails as have not left us trip daintily about the water's edge, and, as the floods subside, the Carrion Crow comes to look over the slimy deposit which remains, on chance of stranded fish or drowned-out mice. The month seldom passes without more or less rough weather, and sometimes brings a storm which, upon the coast, may vie with the worst of the autumn gales. The shore-haunting gulls, with a premonition of what is coming, pass overhead drifting inland for shelter. All night it blows great guns, and next morning, when the air is full of spindrift and flying foam-flakes, we see the Kittiwakes, under ordinary circumstances

HERONS AND WILD DUCKS.
From Painting by FRANK SOUTHGATE.

the gulls of the open sea *par excellence*, close inshore and making the best of the partial protection afforded by the harbour-pier. In continued rough weather many of them are drowned, beaten down into the sea by the gale. Bewildered by the darkness and driven before the tempest, disabled sea-birds,—gannet, shear-water or petrel,—are often picked up far inland when the gale has spent itself. Thus we hear of a puffin found fluttering on the roof of a midland church, just as we have known a water-rail to go astray on migration and turn up in a boot-and-shoe shop. Overhead wires in large cities are often fatal to such storm-driven wanderers, while plate-layers and others who are much about the railway-line know what a toll the telegraph wires exact.

Given a fine morning, even the December sun may for an hour or two make a brave show and give us light sufficient to see what business is forward in copse and hedge-row. We follow the wide, grassy track, nearly disused at the present day, of the old Roman road, deserted now by the summer birds which found cover in its ample edging of briars and brambles. A Kestrel climbs the air with easy sweep, then stands for a moment against the breeze. The fourfold combination of sparrows, chaffinches, greenfinches and yellow-hammers greets us from every hedge. As we come to a dry ditch we hear the squeal of a rabbit and, pulling aside the bushes, see it giving its last convulsive

kicks, while the assassin, a stoat, slips like a guilty shadow into the thicket. The victim has a single bite behind the ear. Amongst the hedge-row timber there is here and there a decayed stump at which the woodpeckers have been at work. A Pied Woodpecker, crimson-capped, dips from tree to tree and alights upon one of these. Ascending by a series of active jerks or upward leaps, he stops to peck with fierce energy at a loose piece of bark to dislodge the hidden grub. A knock upon the next hollow trunk, and a Brown Owl emerges from a hole above our heads and sits with head inclined, wisely observant, upon its cushion of moss and polypody. Nuthatches, creepers and tits are busy turning hibernating spiders out of crevices in the bark. As the nuthatch calls "hwit, hwit, tweet, tweet," it moves its head from side to side with a rapid, twitching movement. Amongst the old timber the Stock Dove is often to be seen, its note a hoarser "coo" than that of the wood-pigeon, and its flight lighter and more nimble.

Now the wood is entered, and here half-a-dozen squirrels are at work, digging for acorns amongst the fallen leaves. Long-tailed pheasants crash heavily up or go footing it along the dry ditches. Their guardian of the velveteen and gaiters tells us that in outlying covers he still has a few of the old English race, with neck unmarked by the white ring, an innovation

due to the introduction, about a century ago, of a variety from the far East. If we accompany the man of traps and guns as he makes his round we shall come to the conclusion that his knowledge of the ways of the tenants of copse and spinney falls little short of all that there is to know. Being a master of his trade, he trusts more to traps than to his gun. Here the bait of a dead rabbit has proved the undoing of a carrion crow, and in this ditch he has placed a little wooden culvert up which any creature of the weasel kind will be certain to venture in its travels, the said culvert containing a well-hidden trap. Sometimes a gin, artfully concealed by soil and grass, is placed in a hollow out of which a sod has been lifted. In the nice adjustment of snares and poisoned baits he is, too, a past master. This rabbit skin, neatly turned inside out, bespeaks the handiwork of the fox. Not such was the fate of the furry owner of the little white skull which we pick up soon afterwards. Two lower incisors grown out into long curved tusks show that dental troubles shortened its days.

Crossing the fields beyond the plantation, we note that the remains of the partridge coveys are uniting to form packs, as they always do towards the close of the shooting season. So the short day passes, well-spent, until with dusk the sparrows noisily go to roost in the ivy, and the greenfinches seek the shelter of the clipped yew-hedges.

One must seize the opportunity of a bright, keen day of Christmas weather to see how the moors look in wintry guise. As we follow up this rippling, eddying north-country "beck," we hear a song which seems like a more musical variation of the chatter of the stream over its stony bed. A white breast, which we take at first for a drifted foam-patch amongst the dark rocks, shows that the author is a Dipper or Water Ouzel. Presently he enters a pool, diving and dabbling as cheerily in the ice-cold water as if the month were May. No winter day, however cheerless, raw or chill, seems to affect the spirits of this Mark Tapley of a bird. In the fringe of plantation below the moor, the Grey Hens come bustling silently out of the spruce firs which are gemmed with frost work,—while with whirr of wings their lord, a stately Black-cock, rises from a patch of rushes. Drifting showers, half snow half frozen sleet, have powdered the moors with white, but as the sun shows through, we hear, the Grouse "becking" and crowing on all sides, and upon the drifts one notes the print of their mittened feet. Here amongst the heather is a grove of small thick-set pines. Approach the nearest of them and with muffled flop a Long-eared Owl leaves its perch and flaps away with noiseless wing-beats, shortly followed by another, and so on, until we have counted six in succession. From the litter and vast accumulation of castings on the ground below, the tree is evidently a regular family

roosting-place. There is a peculiar beauty about the eyes of this bird, with their irides of brilliant and luminous yellow.

As we near the borders of the moorland tarn, a Heron raises his long neck, stands at attention, then, unfolding ample pinions, takes to flight. The night frosts have crisped the shallows with a coating of ice just strong enough to bear the weight of the Wild Ducks, green-headed ruddy-breasted drakes and their more sober-coloured mates, which stand upon it, some preening, others apparently asleep with their bills tucked under their wing-coverts. Now every head is raised, and the next moment the whole flock starts up with whistling wings and vociferous quacking, and, dividing into parties, keeps passing and repassing overhead, clearly outlined against the sunset sky. A bunch of Teal follows, but these smaller wild-fowl have a different flight. They twist about like a flock of dunlin, turn quick as a flash and soon pitch again into cover. We have known a whole flock of Wild Swans, forty-two of them, to alight upon one of these moorland pools and to remain for some weeks. A pair of tame swans easily put the whole party to rout, and it was a fine sight, as they rose one by one, each beginning to give tongue as it left the water. But the short twilight fades, and visions of a blazing hearth outweigh the doubtful attractions of the darkening moor.

WILD FOWL ON THE COAST.

Cold and bleak lies the salt-marsh, in summer gay with sea-lavender and rose flower-heads of thrift. Yet this is no time to sit at home at ease, but rather to sally forth armed with field-glasses, or, if on destruction bent, with lethal weapons, mindful of the wildfowler's aphorism, " the worse the weather, the more the birds." For the latter are here in far larger number and variety than was the case when winds were soft and skies were blue. As regards some species there is little change. The Black-headed Gulls still paddle restlessly about the tide-edge, screaming querulously, and the Ringed Plover still rise with feeble piping note from the shingle where, until they move, they are as invisible as the common-sandpiper is on a mud-bank. Only the graceful terns are gone,—a loss more than atoned for by the arrival of a host of wildfowl from loch and fjord and northern sea. True, the times are not what they used to be, before the birds were harassed by an ever-increasing number of punt-gunners and shore-shooters, or driven from some of their favourite haunts by the vast increase of traffic into and out of the ports and harbours of the east coast. Still when the winter is favourable, i.e., when it brings one or two spells of sharp cold not too long continued, there is something like a return of past glories. Then one may hear again the distant clamour of the Wild Geese sounding like

a pack of beagles in full cry. The Brent Geese ("brants" or "Scotch geese" of the east coast fishermen) come to feed with the wigeon on the banks where the ribbon-like grass-wrack grows. Sometimes, as they stand in rank, looming large in the mist, they look like a regiment of soldiers, and often a favourite shoal is black with them. The old gunner who puts out in pursuit tells us that six Grey Geese passed over his head at daybreak as he was laying down lines for codling. Presently we hear the boom of his big stanchion gun, which moves on a swivel in the stern of his punt. Some of the men who make a living in this way develop powers of eyesight, and an intuitive knowledge of the habits of the birds which almost pass belief. Of course even the uninitiated may pronounce a distant speck to be diver or grebe if it swims with straight, upright neck, in figure and in outline entirely different from a duck. The eye picks out a parti-coloured Shelduck from amongst fowl of less boldly-contrasted plumage, and the shrill whistling of the Wigeon betrays them from afar where they feed with the geese on the outer shoals. Parties of dark-plumaged ducks which dive incessantly near inshore, i.e., above the mussel-beds, are likely to be either Scaup or Scoters. These last are the "black ducks" of the fisherman, as his "dun-birds" are the red-headed Pochards. Of course the common Wild Duck or Mallard is familiar enough upon the coast, especially

when frost drives it from the inland waters. The Golden-eye is known by the whistling or rattling noise made by its wings in flight, and often owes its life to its quickness in diving, disappearing at the flash. As with many of the diving ducks, it is chiefly the females and young birds which come thus far south, so that the obtaining of an old drake Merganser or Goosander in full plumage is a rare event,—pity that the delicate salmon-tint of the under-parts of the latter bird so quickly fades. The Long-tailed Duck, whose loud musical call is heard in summer amongst the northern isles, appears every winter in varying numbers and is the "pintail" of the gunners upon the Yorkshire coast. For memories of the finest sight of all, that of a flock of Wild Swans upon the wing, trumpeting their bugle-call in time to the beating of their great pinions, we must go back some years to a winter of Arctic severity, when the ice-floes went grinding to-and-fro in the estuary and lay piled up upon the shore. Further still, but within the memory of the oldest sportsman, stands out the Crimean winter, when there were all sorts of unfamiliar birds about, and he counted two hundred head of wild fowl one evening in the larder. Round the winter fire while the curlew and redshanks are calling outside in the darkness, further reminiscences follow,—of that great shot at wigeon with the heavy shoulder-gun which took half an ounce of powder, and which resulted in eight and a half couple being

brought to bag,—of the three wild-swans killed with the old flint-and-steel duck gun at one discharge with No. 8,—of the wire cartridge which stopped the Great Northern Diver at an unheard-of distance, and of the great frost when he was out all night, cutting a hole in the ice for the dun-birds and other fowl, after making a rough shelter for himself near by. He once fell asleep while watching, and awoke in a pool of water, which the warmth of his body had melted. The hole was full of dun-birds and the resulting shot gave him eight or nine, some having dived under the ice. Of course there is many a lament at the degeneracy of the present day, "Ah, the winters are not what they were, often they do fare to be more like summer, and those Dutchmen catch all the fowl the other side in their decoys." But when was an old sportsman known to be other than a *laudator temporis acti;* and, whether ducks be many or few, we may see much of interest in these short winter days spent in the cabin amongst the sand-hills.

The finches which go trooping over the saltings amongst the seeding aster and sea-lavender, are not linnets but Twites from the north country moorlands. Reed Buntings come daily to the dunes to feed on the seeds of the sand-grass, and amongst the skylarks one may sometimes detect the Shore Lark, which we have seen in its summer home amongst the Lapland fells. The warren at the back of the dunes has more

than once been visited by an Eagle. The great bird is almost always a young example of the white-tailed species, though, if it fall a victim to the keeper's gun or traps, the chances are ten to one that it will be recorded in the local papers as "a fine golden-eagle." At long intervals an Osprey may be seen to flap and circle above the tidal lagoon, plunging to seize a mullet which it bears away in its claws. The coarse tussock-grass of the marshes is full of the runs of field-mice; these have proved an attraction to the Short-eared Owls, one or more of which may be seen upon the wing, not only in the twilight, but at all hours of the day. Kingfishers frequent the half-frozen marsh-drains. Every morning, as soon as the sun has got the better of the light purple mist which hangs over the sea, a great flock of Dunlin is on the move, looking in the distance like a shifting cloud of smoke, then wheeling so that we catch the gleam of sunshine on five hundred snowy breasts. Otherwise there are not many wading birds about, but the Oyster-catchers still follow the tide as it retires, paddling about on the ooze, and, when the ebb has transformed the lagoon into a narrow channel lost amidst wide stretching mud-banks, Curlew and Redshanks flock, as earlier in the season, to their favourite feeding-grounds.

Now to hie northward, away from tidal-flats and oozy creeks, to a bold, rocky coast, and to the sharp Yorkshire air. Keen is the salt tang of the north-easter

as it whistles across this rocky ledge, which runs far out to sea. It is a favourite landing-place for birds coming in from the north or north-east, and wildfowl passing up or down the coast must either cross it or go out of their way to avoid it. As they usually adopt the former course, this natural breakwater makes the best of stations for observation and also, as many an old gunner knows, for lying ambushed amongst the boulders, his black-coated retriever at his feet, and his heavy muzzle-loader in readiness for the flight ducks. There he will wait for hours, sometimes in bitter weather, when it is blowing hard, and when snow-showers close in the outlook but for a momentary clearance about every half hour. Under such circumstances the ducks are sure to be on the move. A wood-pigeon comes in from seaward, and a wood-cock follows, just topping the waves,—curious that migration should be continued thus late, to the very close of the year. A little bunch of Knots in grey winter dress alights close at hand to seek shelter on the margin of a rock-pool. In a lull between the squalls, Snow Buntings twitter cheerfully from the grassy cliff-slope. Following them up, we find a large flock of Golden Plover, resting with peewits on a frozen stubble. In another field a party of Dunlin, driven from the shore by the tide, is running about with larks and starlings. In such wild and wintry weather we never fail to see the Glaucous Gull, a fine species

hailing from the polar seas and with the same stretch of wings as our Great Black-Back. In really severe weather they may appear in some numbers, but there are few adults amongst them, the majority being young birds in spotted plumage.

But the braw north-easter does not always whistle even on this exposed coast. At the very end of the month comes a day of calm sea and cloudless sky. Out in the bay the glass shows us diver after diver and party after party of ducks resting at ease on the slow-heaving oily swell. The ducks in such weather are hopelessly unapproachable; not so the divers, which often swim close inshore, turning to dive through an advancing wave just before it breaks. Black-headed Gulls, playing about the tide-edge, descend with sudden swoop, just touching the water with their feet. A Cormorant flaps along the surface splashing like a coot, while others sit in solemn conclave on a rocky stack. Curlew, wild and wary as always, feed upon the outer skerries, until the rising tide moves them, and a Heron, which has remained until knee-deep, at last has to flap away. Half-a-dozen Oyster-catchers stand upon a flat reef in the wash of the tide; their orange bills seem to flame against the dark background of weed and rock. The glass shows that at times they rest on one leg with the bill tucked into the feathers of the back, in attitudes and movements extremely stork-like. With them, moving briskly about amongst

the fronds of the sea-wrack stirred by the incoming ripples, is a smaller bird which proves to be a Purple Sandpiper. Far less shy than most of its kind, we may watch it, usually solitary, in its search for small molluscs and crustaceans upon the weed-grown ledges and upon the margins of the pools. With shrill note a Rock Pipit rises, acting as sentinel to the larger fowl.

So the short day closes ; the purple hues of sunset,—the last of the year—die away on sand-flats and shallows, and we turn homeward, thinking of all the wealth of enjoyment which the study of nature has afforded us through the twelve months which are ended and anticipating a renewal of the outdoor life with all its pleasures in the year which is to come.

CALENDAR FOR DECEMBER.

Dec. 5th.—Mistle Thrushes begin to sing more freely.
,, 9th.—Meadow Pipits still flocking.
, 16th.—Tree Creeper still sings.
,, 21st.—Common or Corn Bunting sings.
,, 23rd.—Stock Dove coos.
,, 25th.—Dipper or Water Ouzel sings.
Lesser Redpolls at the alder-cones.
,, 27th.—Remains of Partridge coveys pack.
,, 28th.—Pied Woodpecker working at a fresh boring.
,, 29th.—Fieldfares resort to turnips in frost.
,, 30th.—Redwings at holly berries.

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